BE

A

LAMP

UPON

YOURSELF

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for free distribution

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It is very, very rare for one to have a precious human life and still be able to encounter the Buddha-Dharma, therefore please handle this book with utmost respect and care.

Dedication

This book is dedicated to all beings.
May each be a lamp upon oneself.
May all be Bodhisattvas to one another,
and attain Enlightenment swiftly.

This book is inspired by the works of:
Venerable Thich Nhat Hanh
Venerable Dr. K. Sri Dhammananda
Venerable Thubten Chodron
Venerable S. Dhammika
Brother Piya Tan,
and many other great Dharma teachers…

Dear

Reader,

"The gift of the Dharma excels all gifts."

Do you wish to offer this highest gift to others, so that more can be touched by the beauty of the Dharma, and be inspired to lead happy and meaningful lives? If so, you can share in the production costs of this and many other beautiful Dharma CDs and books for free distribution. Please photocopy and fill in the sponsorship form at the end of this book, and send it back to us.

Thank You.

Contents

Foreword

Welcome to the revised edition of "Be A Lamp Upon Yourself". With the appeal of this handy book being its concise approach to the basic teachings of the Buddha, we hope you will find it useful as an introduction to the vast field of the Buddha's teachings.

As the Buddha taught, the gift of truth excels all other gifts. Should you no longer need it, please share this book with a friend. Together, may we all know the Dharma and make the Dharma be known.

Yours in the Dharma,
Shen Shi'an (editor)
Kong Meng San Phor Kark See Monastery
Dharma Propagation Division

A Summarised Dialogue of the Buddha

Q: Are you a “god”?

A: No.

Q: Are you an “angel”?

A: No.

Q: Are you a human?

A: No.

Q: Then what are you?

A: I am “Awake”.

(The Buddha: A Fully Awakened One;
“Teacher of Humans and Gods”)

"Be islands (lamps) unto yourselves,
be a refuge unto yourselves
with no other refuge.
Let the Dhamma be your island,
let the Dhamma be your refuge,
with no other refuge."

- The Buddha
(Cakkavatti-Sihanada Sutta:
The Lion's Roar on the Turning of the Wheel)

Thought of The Buddha Before His Enlightenment:

"Then I thought:
Why, being myself subject to
birth, ageing, sickness, death,
sorrow and defilement,
do I seek after what is also
subject to these things?

Suppose,
being myself
subject to these things,
seeing danger in them,
I seek after the
unborn, unageing, unailing,
deathless, sorrowless, undefiled
supreme liberation from bondage-
NIRVANA ?"

:Thought to Motivate Us Towards Enlightenment



What's so Wonderful about Buddhism ?

Here are some outstanding features of Buddhism.

Perfect Example

The historical Buddha was an embodiment of all the virtues that He preached. He translated all His words into action. He was tireless in His spreading of the truth and was the perfect model example. At no time did He ever show any human weakness or base passion. His qualities of morality, wisdom and compassion are the most perfect the world has ever known.

Your Possible Perfection

The Buddha represents the highest possible peak of spiritual cultivation. He taught that all could attain true perfection. Few, if any, founders of religions taught that their followers too have the same chance to gain the same experience of peace, happiness and salvation as oneself. But the Buddha taught that anyone could attain the same bliss of supreme Enlightenment if one practised as He did.

Beyond Religion

If the definition of "religion" is the unquestioning belief and worship of a supreme entity, with the obligation to carry out rites and rituals, then Buddhism is definitely not a religion. It is beyond all conventional definitions of religion—for Buddhism encourages intelligent doubting and believes in the potential supremacy of the

individual. Rites and rituals are seen as ceremonies that help guide and inspire us. They are important in that sense, but they do not give us wisdom or True Happiness. Buddhism is however called a religion out of convention.

Universality

As the Buddha's concern is the True Happiness of all beings, His teachings can be practised in society or seclusion, by all of every race and belief. It is totally unbiased and truly universal.

Purification of the Mind

Buddhism is the only religion that encourages not just the ceasing of all evil and the doing of all good—it also teaches the purification of one's mind, which is the root of all good and evil, the cause of both suffering and True Happiness.

Self-Reliance

When the Buddha was meditating to gain Enlightenment, no gods came to reveal any hidden secrets of spiritual power. No one gave Him any religious laws to teach. He said, "I never had any teacher or divinity to teach me or tell me how to gain Enlightenment. I achieved supreme wisdom by my own effort, energy, knowledge and purity." Likewise, we can attain this highest goal through perseverance in perfecting ourselves.

Freedom of Thought

From the intellectual and philosophical content of Buddhism rose the freedom of thought and inquiry unparalleled by any other established world religion or philosophy. Though the Buddha urges us to consider His teachings, there is no obligation or compulsion whatsoever to believe or accept any Buddhist doctrine.

Education of the Truth

The Buddha is the greatest teacher of the truth (reality of all things). Buddhism offers the perfect education about us and the universe we live in. It is the teaching beyond worldly knowledge—of the highest wisdom that leads to the realisation of True Happiness. It is interesting to note that the first university established in the world is the great Nalanda Buddhist University in India, which flourished from the second to the ninth century. It was open to students all over the world and was the school of many outstanding Buddhist scholars and sages.

Standing Unchallenged

The Buddha was an unequalled teacher. He freely and actively invited both His followers and those of other beliefs to challenge His teachings from every possible angle till there was no room

for any kind of doubt. True to His injunctions, His followers have debated about His doctrine and even founded various schools of Buddhism according to their understanding without violence or bloodshed. The Buddha knew that if one really believed that one knows the truth, one should not be afraid to have it challenged, as the truth will always win. His replies to numerous questions enriched the Buddhist doctrine into a vast religious field. We are today able to answer many questions about Buddhism and the universe, simply by referring to the Buddha's explanations.

No Blind Faith

The Buddha did not promise heavenly bliss or reward to those who called themselves His followers. Nor did He promise salvation to those who had faith in Him. To Him, religion is not a bargain but a noble way of life to gain Enlightenment and salvation for oneself and others.

He did not want followers who believed Him blindly. He wanted us to think and understand for ourselves.

The Buddha urged all to come forth to discover more about Buddhism and not simply believe in it. He advised choosing a proper religion by considering and investigating it in various ways, without accepting anything through emotion or blind faith. This is why Buddhism is sometimes called the religion of analysis. In it is the scientific logical analysis of mind and matter which modern thinkers appreciate. Even today, Buddhists are encouraged to have the attitude of a healthy sceptic, including towards the Buddhist scriptures!

From Experience and Reason to Faith

Buddhism is the only religion, which was explained

through the experience and Enlightenment of its founder (the Buddha), without introducing it as a message by any god. It starts from the root of known experience and not faith. Human problems must be understood by one through human experience and solved by developing great humane qualities. One should seek solutions through the purification and development of the mind, not through outsiders. This is why the Buddha never introduced Himself as a supernatural saviour. According to Him, we can be our own saviours.

The Whole Truth

The Buddha encourages us to face the facts of life courageously, without acting hypocritically, and to accept the truth whatever and wherever it may be. All that He taught were timeless practical truths leading us towards True Happiness.

Scientific in Spirit

Buddhism never found the need to give new interpretations to its teachings. Newly verified scientific discoveries never contradict the teachings of the Buddha as their spirit and methodologies are scientifically valid. Buddhism's principles can be maintained under any circumstances without changing their basic ideas. The capacity to understand the value of Buddhist ideas may diminish and disappear from human mind in time. However, the value of the Buddha's teachings will be appreciated by every cultured and understanding person at any time. As complimented by Albert Einstein (physicist and mathematician), winner of the Nobel Prize, who is popularly regarded as the most outstanding scientist of the twentieth century,

"The religion of the future will be a cosmic religion. It should transcend a personal God and avoid dogmas and theology. Covering both the natural and

the spiritual, it should be based on a religious sense arising from the experience of all things, natural and spiritual, as a meaningful unity. Buddhism answers this description... If there is any religion that would cope with modern scientific needs, it would be Buddhism."

Supreme Philosophy

As complimented by Lord Bertrand Russell (mathematician, author and social critic), winner of the Nobel Prize, who is popularly regarded as the most outstanding philosopher of the twentieth century,

"Of the great religions of history, I prefer Buddhism... Buddhism is a combination of both speculative and scientific philosophy. It advocates the Scientific Method and pursues that to a finality that may be called Rationalistic. In it are to be found answers to such questions of interest as 'What is mind and matter? Of them, which is of greater importance? Is

the universe moving towards a goal? What is man's position? Is there living that is noble?' It takes up where science cannot lead because of the limitations of the latter's instruments. Its conquests are those of the mind."

Supreme Psychology

In the course of their work, many psychologists have found, as the pioneering work of Dr. Carl G. Jung (founder of Analytic Psychology—a pioneer of an aspect of modern psychology) has shown, we are closer to the Buddha than we think. To read a little Buddhism is to realise that the Buddhists knew, more than 2,500 years ago, far more about our modern problems of psychology than they have yet been given credit for. They studied these problems long ago, and found the answers too. As complimented by Jung,

"As a student of comparative religions, I believe that

Buddhism is the most perfect one the world has seen. The philosophy of the theory of evolution and the law of Karma are far superior to any other creed...

It was neither the history of religion nor the study of philosophy that first drew me to the world of Buddhist thought, but my professional interest as a doctor. My task was to treat psychic suffering and it was this that impelled me to become acquainted with the views and methods of that great teacher of humanity [the Buddha], whose principal theme was [breaking] the chain of suffering, old age, sickness and death."

No Fear

The Buddha is a major historical figure who promoted the rise of rational faith against the superstitions of blind faith. He emancipated humankind from the authority of corrupted priests, and was the first to show the way to

freedom from religious hypocrisy and dictatorship. Buddhism is a religion that uses reason and no element of fear to coerce anyone to believe in it.

UNIVERSAL COMPASSION

As the Buddha's compassion is universal, He sees all creatures great and small, from insects to beasts, as ultimately equal, each with the same rights to happiness as us.

NON-VIOLENCE

There is no such thing as a just war in Buddhism. The Buddha taught that, "The victor breeds hatred and the defeated lives in misery. He who renounces both victory and defeat is happy and peaceful." Not only did the Buddha teach non-violence and peace, He was probably the first and only religious founder who went to the battlefield to prevent the outbreak of a war.

Human Equality

The Buddha was among the first to speak against the caste system, on the importance of individual rights and the equality of all humans despite differences in social standing, race and religion. He also encouraged the spirit of social co-operation and active participation in society at all levels. According to the Buddha, the only classification of humans should be based on the quality of their moral conduct. The Buddha said,

"Go into all lands and preach this teaching. Tell them that the poor and the lowly, the rich and the high are all one and that all castes unite in this religion as do the rivers in the sea."

Sexual Equality

Seeing the two sexes as ultimately equal in rights, the Buddha was the first religious teacher who gave women freedom to participate fully in the

religious life. His move to allow women to enter the Sangha (order of monks and nuns) was indeed brave and radical in His times.

Democracy

The Buddha was the first to advocate the spirit of open consultation in the democratic process. In the Sangha community, each member had individual rights to decide on matters of general concern. When a serious question arose, the issues were put forth and discussed in a manner similar to today's democratic parliamentary system.

Ecological Consciousness

The Buddha strongly encouraged care and respect for the planet's environment as He clearly saw the close interdependence between all beings and nature.

No Sacrificial Rites

The Buddha disapproved of animal sacrifice as He saw it cruel and unfair for anyone to destroy any living being for one's selfish "benefit".

No Flowery Miracles

To the Buddha, miracles are but manifestations of phenomena not understood by most. They are not seen as demonstrations of Enlightenment or wisdom, as supernatural powers can be mastered by anybody. The supernatural is simply natural phenomena not understood by the unenlightened. The ability to perform miracles is seen as a by-product of spiritual development—of minor importance and relevance to the real goal of spiritual perfection. Though the Buddha had full mastery of psychic abilities, He used them only out of compassion, as a skilful means to teach. He never used His powers to win followers through

blind faith or dependency on miracles. He taught that the highest miracle is the "conversion" of an ignorant person to a wise one.

No Political Abuse

The Buddha was born of royalty, and associated with kings, princes and ministers. Yet, He never resorted to the influence of political power to introduce His teachings. Nor did He allow His teachings to be misused for gaining political power. However, He urged kings to be morally strong, teaching that a country should not be ruled by greed, but with compassion and consideration for the people.

No Non-forgiveness

There is no concept of "unforgivable sin" in Buddhism. The Buddha taught that all deeds are either skilful or unskilful due to the presence or

absence of wisdom respectively. There is always hope for improvement as long as one recognises one's mistakes and changes for the better.

No Stubborn Exclusivity

The Buddha taught that if any religion has the teachings of the Four Noble Truths and the Noble Eightfold Path, it may be regarded as a proper religion. This is because a truly helpful religion must lead to the total eradication of suffering (as in the Four Noble Truths), clearly showing a rational path towards True Happiness (as in the Noble Eightfold Path).

Harmonious Missionary Work

An outstanding example of the qualities and approach of a Buddhist missionary is the great Emperor Asoka, who sent Buddhist missionaries

to many parts of Asia and the West to introduce the Buddha's message of peace. One of his scripts engraved in stone on an Asoka pillar, which still stands today reads,

"One should not honour only one's religion and condemn the religion of others, but one should honour others' religion for this or that reason. In so doing, one helps one's own religion to grow and renders service to the religions of others too. In acting otherwise, one digs the grave of one's own religion and also does harm to other religions."

Unholy wars, crusades, inquisitions and religious discrimination do not mar the annals of Buddhist history. Buddhist missionaries have no need or desire to convert those who already have a proper religion to practise. Buddhists are happy to see the progress of other religions so long as they help people to lead a moral way of life according to their faith, and enjoy peace, harmony and true understanding. However, the Buddha also urged

us to share the truth with those who might be interested in it,

"Go forth, O Bhikkhus (monks), for the good of the many, for the happiness of the many, out of compassion for the world, for the good, benefit and the happiness of gods and humans... Let not two go by one way. Preach, O Bhikkhus, the Dharma (way to the truth), excellent in the beginning, excellent in the middle, excellent in the end, both in spirit and in the letter. Proclaim the holy life altogether perfect and pure."

The Worthiest Goal

The attainment of Buddhahood (full Enlightenment), or the achievement of True Happiness for oneself and others is the most challenging, yet most worthwhile goal. However, because practising Buddhism means following the Noble Eightfold Path (or the Middle Way), Buddhists never have to go into any form of extremism.

Complete Overview of Humankind and Religion

The Buddha explained rationally and in detail how various religious systems evolved though history with changes in the thinking of humankind. He also gave us a comprehensive overview of the effects of religion on humans.

Complete Path Towards True Happiness

The Buddha's teachings form a complete and colossal interconnected syllabus, which covers every timeless aspect of life. The ancient collection of Buddhist scriptures was said to pile up to "the height of seven elephants"! Being history's longest teaching religious founder, the Buddha expounded for 45 years on all that was necessary to attain True Happiness. He asked His assembly of thousands of disciples thrice, on whether they

had any remaining doubts before His final passing. There were none.

Happiness in This Life

Buddhism does not focus only on the afterlife. Though practising Buddhism in this life has positive effects that extend beyond this life, many fruits of our practice can be savoured in this very life.

Everything is Open

According to the Buddha, the truth in his teachings is open for everyone to discover personally. While there are advanced teachings which require specific guidance of experienced teachers, there are no secrets in Buddhism.

Goodwill and Understanding

The Buddha's message of goodwill and understanding to all beings is a universal message. The world today needs this noble message more than ever before. If so, may we learn and share it with more!



How to Seek the Truth

A summary of the Kalama Sutta (The Charter on Free Inquiry), which offers guidelines on seeking the truth wisely:

Once, in the Buddha's time, He came across the village of the Kalamas. The Kalamas were among the smartest and most intellectual people in India. Together, they went to ask the Buddha, "How do we know what you teach is true? All the other spiritual teachers (there were more than 60 religious beliefs then) who came by claim that only what they alone teach is true, that what all others teach is untrue."

To that, the Buddha smiled gently and replied, "

1. Do not simply believe what you hear just because you have heard it for a long time.
2. Do not follow tradition blindly merely because it has been practised in that way for many generations.
3. Do not be quick to listen to rumours.
4. Do not confirm anything just because it agrees with your scriptures.
5. Do not foolishly make assumptions.
6. Do not abruptly draw conclusions by what you see and hear.
7. Do not be fooled by outward appearances.
8. Do not hold on tightly to any view or idea just because you are comfortable with it.
9. Do not accept as fact anything that you yourself find to be logical.
10. Do not be convinced of anything out of respect and reference to your spiritual teachers.

You should go beyond opinion and belief. You can rightly reject anything which when accepted and practised, leads to more anger (aversion), more greed (craving) and more delusion (ignorance). The knowledge that you are angry, greedy or deluded does not depend on either belief or opinion. Remember that anger, greed and delusion are things universally condemned. They are not beneficial and are to be avoided.

Conversely, you can accept anything which when accepted and practised leads to unconditional love, contentment and wisdom. These qualities allow you time and space to develop a happy and peaceful mind. Therefore, the wise praise unconditional love, contentment and wisdom.

This should be your criteria on what is and what is not the truth; on what should be and what should not be the spiritual practice."

Hearing that, the Kalamas were pleased, and with an open heart and mind, having embraced the spirit of free enquiry, listened and questioned to clarify their doubts, and wholeheartedly accepted the teachings of the Buddha.



The Buddha

Here are some common questions about the Buddha:

What is a Buddha?

The word "Buddha" means "The Awakened (or Enlightened) One". A Buddha was previously a human being like us, who had reached the highest peak of spiritual cultivation through purification and mastery of the mind, attaining the greatest perfection possible by anyone. Having awakened to reality, He is one who has found True Happiness in realising the true nature of all things. With the attainment of Enlightenment (realisation of the truth of all things), wisdom and compassion are perfected among other countless

positive qualities. Having become a Buddha, one transcends the limitations of a human (and gender) and becomes much greater than a human or god, gaining ultimate peace and liberation.

Can I Become a BUDDHA?

The potential of attaining Enlightenment or Buddhahood exists in each and every sentient being (including us). We all possess within ourselves the perfect goodness of Buddha-nature (potential for Buddhahood), which is like the bright full moon. The path towards Enlightenment is the clearing of the dark clouds of defilements (negative qualities—chiefly craving, aversion and ignorance) that overshadow our Buddha-nature, so as to let it shine forth. There are already countless Buddhas in existence and there will be countless more as long as there are those earnest in seeking the truth.

Who is the Buddha?

The Buddha is the greatest character that ever appeared in the history of humankind—being an embodiment of one perfect in thought, word and deed. He was the wisest and most loving being who ever graced the Earth, an example of how great we can all become. "The Buddha" refers to the historical Shakyamuni Buddha who was born in Northern India (present day Nepal) more than 2,500 years ago (at about 563 B.C.). He is regarded as the founder of Buddhism for our world. He was a noble Shakyan Prince (Siddhartha Gautama) with an entire kingdom of riches to inherit, who chose to renounce it at the age of 29 in search of Enlightenment (realisation of the truth of all things and True Happiness) out of compassion for all beings. After He attained Enlightenment at 35, He shared the inspiring truth tirelessly for 45 years to all who were willing to learn from Him. He passed away into the deep peace of Parinirvana at 80. His life is full

of inspiring stories of how He touched people from all walks of life with His wisdom and compassion.

What did the Buddha Teach?

The Buddha's message is a joyous one. He found the precious treasure of freedom in the truth and taught us how to follow the way that leads us to this same treasure. Though He tells us that we are in deep darkness, He also teaches us the path that leads to the light. He wishes us to rise from a life of unreal dreams to a higher life of wisdom where all love and do not hate. His appeal is universal, because He appeals to reason, and to the universal search for True Happiness. He put truth to the crucial test of personal experience, encouraging everyone to doubt His teachings, believing that great realisations can arise from clearing great doubts. He taught us to be mindful of ourselves and to become awake, to seek and to find True Happiness like He did.

How Can the Buddha Help Me?

The Buddha is a spiritual genius as He reached the goal of the spiritual quest (Enlightenment) by Himself. However, He could see that while we too can attain Enlightenment, we might need a lot of help. Out of compassion, He devoted the rest of His life to being a guide to all who were willing to learn from Him, teaching all that had to be taught before passing into everlasting bliss. He proved to be just as ingenious in showing us the path to True Happiness. As long as we keep our hearts and minds open, the Buddha still inspires us through His precious teachings.

Where is the Buddha Now?

The Buddhas are described as having three bodies *(Trikaya)* or aspects of existence, though they are in ultimate reality one in all and all in one:

1. Truth body
2. Bliss body
3. Manifestation body (bodies)

The Truth Body of Buddhas

The truth body of a Buddha *(Dharmakaya)* is the embodiment of the Dharma (truth itself) that is eternally present everywhere, expressed in the natural laws of the universe and the workings of these laws. Sometimes we catch a glimpse of this wonderful reality when we are at peace and at one with everything. This body of truth is in all things though it is beyond shape and form. It is represented by Vairocana Buddha, the central and universal Buddha who is preaching the truth right here and now. He is both one and many at the same time as He manifests in many forms. Our inability to see or hear Him is due to our defilements.

The Buddha taught, "He who sees the Dharma (the truth) sees the Buddha. He who sees the Buddha sees the Dharma." A Buddha, having realised the truth, becomes equal to the truth. Though there are many Buddhas, all Buddhas are one and the same, being no different from one another in the *Dharmakaya*, which is the oneness of truth.

The *Dharmakaya* exists simultaneously with the *Sambhogakaya* and *Nirmanakaya*. (See "The Bliss Body of Buddhas" and "The Manifestation Body of Buddhas")

With the moon representing the Buddha, the Dharmakaya is like the rays of the moon that shine at night. These rays of light might not be visible to the eye as they do not illuminate the darkness of space, but they pervade it fully everywhere.

The Bliss Body of Buddhas

The bliss body of a Buddha *(Sambhogakaya)* or Rocana Buddha is the magnificent blissful reward body of a Buddha. It is the aspect through which each Buddha rejoices in the truth, in teaching the truth, and in leading others to the realisation of the truth. Because each Buddha has practised through countless ages to attain perfect wisdom and compassion, each has immeasurable peace, merits and happiness, as expressed in the *Sambhogakaya*. Buddhas usually do not appear in this form among humans as we lack the merits to perceive them this way. Instead, they manifest as *Nirmanakayas* (see "The Manifestation Body of Buddhas").

With the moon representing the Buddha, the *Sambhogakaya* is like the unclouded full moon shining bright in its total splendour.

The Manifestation Body of Buddhas

An example of a manifestation body of a Buddha *(Nirmanakaya)* in our world is the transformed body of the historical Shakyamuni Buddha. It is the Buddha expressed in a human form. A Buddha can also manifest in many different forms at the same time to teach the truth to many beings. Having attained perfection, the abilities of a Buddha are far beyond that of ordinary humans. It is out of compassion, to be an example, and to teach the truth to many, that a Buddha chooses to appear in a form (instead of the *Sambhogakaya*—see "The Bliss Body of Buddhas") that we can relate to.

When the Buddha entered Parinirvana, only His physical body passed away. The essence of His Enlightenment still exists in the form of the *Dharmakaya*, *Sambhogakaya* and other *Nirmanakayas*. Today, the physical relics of the

Buddha's manifested body are enshrined in stupas all over the world.

With the moon representing the Buddha, the *Nirmanakaya* is like a reflection of the moon upon a lake. One moon can be reflected differently in many lakes at the same time.



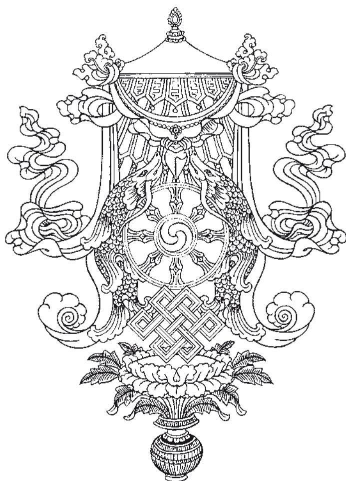
The Four Noble Truths

The Buddha's teachings are based upon the solid foundation of truth stated in the Four Noble Truths, which can be known by all. They are not beliefs with unknown basis accepted on mere faith. They start from the centre of our very own undeniable direct human experience.

What are The Four Noble Truths?

The Buddha was only interested in showing us a clear direct path to True Happiness. The Four Noble Truths form the heart of the Buddha's

Teachings. They are noble because they are taught by the Noble Ones—those who have direct perception of reality. By understanding them, we become ennobled.



The First Noble Truth :

THE TRUTH OF DUKKHA

Life is Full of Dissatisfactions—

We undergo many dissatisfactory experiences *(Dukkha)* which should be identified:

Birth, Ageing, Sickness, Death, Departure from who/what we like, Being with who/what we dislike, Failing to achieve or be with who/what we want...

The Second Noble Truth :

THE TRUTH OF THE ORIGIN OF DUKKHA

The Causes of Dissatisfactions—

These unsatisfactory experiences have causes which should be identified:

Craving (Greed or Wanting),
Aversion (Hatred or Not-Wanting) and
Ignorance (Delusion or Lack of Wisdom)

The Third Noble Truth :

The Truth of the End of Dukkha–Nirvana

Life Can be Without Dissatisfactions—

There is a peaceful state where there are no unsatisfactory experiences:

Enlightenment or Nirvana (the extinguishment of Craving, Aversion and Ignorance)

The Fourth Noble Truth :

THE TRUTH OF THE PATH LEADING TO THE END OF DUKKHA

The Way to Life Without Dissatisfactions—

There is a path to lead us to this state of supreme peace and True Happiness:

The Noble Eightfold Path

Why is there so much "Suffering" in Buddhism?

The use of the word "suffering" in Buddhism can be misleading. When we hear Buddhists say "life is suffering," we wonder what it means, as most of us don't experience extreme misery most of the time.

The actual word used by the Buddha is "Dukkha", which means that "things aren't completely right in our lives, as there are many unsatisfactory conditions in our existence; something always seems amiss." "Suffering" in Buddhism thus refers to all kinds of dissatisfactions big and small.

What about Happiness?

To live unenlightened is to experience a greater or lesser degree of dissatisfaction. The Buddha never denied that there is joy and happiness in life. But the nagging problem of dissatisfaction is always

around, while happiness is always swiftly fleeting by. This is the only problem in our lives. But it is also the biggest problem as it encompasses all problems we face. The Buddha was only drawing our attention to the fact that suffering is an inevitable part of life, that it is a problem that all experience, and wish to avoid, and that it can be overcome with the attainment of Nirvana (True Happiness).

Are the Four Noble Truths Pessimistic?

Some say Buddhism is a pessimistic religion—that it keeps talking about suffering. This is definitely untrue. But neither is Buddhism a blindly optimistic religion. It is however, realistic and full of hope, as it teaches that True Happiness is achievable through personal endeavour, one being the master of one's life.

Problems and difficulties exist whether we think

of them or not. But only with honest recognition of them, is solving them possible. The Buddha stated the indisputable truth that life is full of dissatisfactions so that He could teach us the way out of dissatisfactions, towards True Happiness!

How are the Four Noble Truths Important?

To realise the Four Noble Truths is the central task of the Buddhist life as they lead to True Happiness. You will discover that the structure of the Four Noble Truths is the most simple, logical, scientific and systematic problem-solving formula possible. As these truths solve the ultimate problem of suffering, they are very important indeed.

How do the Four Noble Truths Work?

The first truth states our problem of suffering.

The second states the cause of the problem. The third states the ideal state without the problem, and the fourth truth states how this ideal state can be achieved.

What is the Origin of The Four Noble Truths?

The Four Noble Truths were first taught by the Buddha during His first sermon at the Deer Park in Isipatana (of ancient India near today's Benares) after He attained Enlightenment—that was more than 2,500 years ago. The sermon was called the *Dhammacakkappavattana Sutta* (Setting in Motion the Wheel of the Dharma). All the teachings that the Buddha later gave were either further in-depth elaborations of the Four Noble Truths, or teachings that led to them. He used a wide variety of skilful means and methods in teaching them to different people.



The Noble Eightfold Path

What is The Noble Eightfold Path?

The Noble Eightfold Path (the Fourth Noble Truth) is a systematic and complete formula to rid dissatisfaction and attain True Happiness. It contains everything needed for virtuous living, clarity of understanding and the attaining of Enlightenment. The eight factors of the Noble Eightfold Path can be divided into three aspects called the Threefold Training:

Moral Conduct:

- Right Speech
- Right Action
- Right Livelihood

Mental Development:

- Right Effort
- Right Mindfulness
- Right Concentration

Wisdom:

- Right Understanding
- Right Thought

Right Speech

We should make an effort to notice and comment upon others' good qualities and achievements instead of venting our anger or frustration on them. We can give others moral support, console them in times of grief, and share with them the Dharma. Speech is a powerful tool to influence others. When used wisely, many will benefit. Right Speech includes the avoidance of:

- Lying
- Tale-bearing

- Harsh speech
- Idle talk

We should

- Praise when appropriate
- Criticise only constructively
- Spread the truth
- Say healing words
- Remain silent when necessary

Right Action

The practice of Right Action involves the respect for the life, property and personal relationships of others. It helps to develop a character that is self-controlled and mindful of the rights of others. Right Action includes the avoidance of:

- Killing
- Stealing
- Sexual misconduct

Right Action also includes physically acting in ways that benefit others. This includes helping and rescuing others from danger or suffering.

Right Livelihood

A Right Livelihood is a means to earn one's living in a way that is not harmful to others. In the choice of one's occupation, one should show respect for the life and welfare of all beings.

There are five trades that the Buddha considered as unworthy means to make one's living. They should be avoided as they cause suffering and unhappiness to others or create disunity in society. The trades that ought to be avoided are trade in:

- Deadly weapons
- Animals (for slaughter)
- Slavery
- Intoxicants
- Poisons

Right Effort

Effort is needed to cultivate virtues or to develop one's mind, because one is often distracted or tempted to take the easy way out. The Buddha taught that attaining True Happiness and Enlightenment depends upon one's own efforts. Effort is the root of all achievements. Thus, no matter how great the Buddha's achievement may be, or how excellent His teachings are, one must put them into practice before one can expect to obtain the desired results. There are four kinds of efforts to be practised:

1. Effort to rid unwholesome thoughts (of craving, aversion and ignorance) that have arisen
2. Effort to prevent the arising of unwholesome thoughts
3. Effort to maintain wholesome thoughts that have arisen (of generosity, loving-kindness and wisdom, even when not appreciated by others)
4. Effort to develop wholesome thoughts

Right Mindfulness

Mindfulness is an essential quality in everyone's daily activities. It is the mental factor that enables us to remember, and keep our awareness and attention on what is beneficial in terms of thoughts, words and deeds. For example, when we awake in the morning, we can determine, "Today I will try not to harm others and will benefit them as much as possible." Mindfulness helps to keep this thought in our mind all day and makes us aware of whether our daily actions correspond to this motivation. The mind must constantly be aware of what is happening for neither mishaps nor misgivings to occur.

Perfecting mindfulness is necessary if one is to progress towards Enlightenment. The mind must be controlled and protected against distractions. Greed and anger should be consciously avoided. Attention is given to the mind because it is through

the mind that everything is comprehended, interpreted and understood. If lasting happiness is to be attained, the undisciplined mind must first be looked after. To tame the mind is to tame one's world.

Right Concentration

Meditation helps to train the mind to focus on a single object, and to remain fixed upon that object without wavering. The object of concentration may be a material thing such as a flower or a quality such as loving-kindness. Even if one is to practise meditation for fifteen minutes a day, one will begin to experience its benefits. The regular practice of meditation helps one to develop a calm and concentrated mind, and prepares one for the attainment of wisdom, and ultimately, Enlightenment.

Right Understanding

Right Understanding is the seeing of all things as they really are, rather than what they appear to be. In order to see things as such, one must observe one's self and situation carefully, examining the meaning of what is observed. It is the true knowledge of all things realised by oneself through practice.

An enquiring and analytical attitude is important in acquiring Right Understanding. The Buddha taught us not to rely upon hearsay, tradition or authority for the truth, but to judge the truth in the light of our own unbiased and objective experience. The Buddha taught that just as a wise person does not blindly accept any metal that glitters as gold on the advice of another, but tests its properties for oneself, so should one not accept what is heard without testing it by one's own experience.

Nonetheless, in seeking the truth, one can do well to turn to the teachings of the Buddha for guidance. This is the first step towards developing Right Understanding. One should listen to and study the teachings of the Buddha and the explanations of qualified teachers. But listening to the Buddha's teachings alone is not enough. One must also be attentive and try earnestly to remember and practise them.

The Buddha says developing Right Understanding is like a blind man who has his eyesight restored, and whose attitude changes towards things he used to like and dislike because he can now see them accurately.

Right Thought

Thoughts influence one's words and actions. If one speaks or acts out of greed or anger, then one will speak or act wrongly and suffer consequently. It

is necessary to purify one's thoughts if one really wishes to improve one's conduct. Having Right Thought is to know how to use the knowledge that we have for the benefit of one and all.

Right Thought avoids craving and ill-will, and cultivates thoughts of renunciation, loving-kindness and compassion. Craving should be avoided because it can never be fully satisfied, while leading to unwholesome actions. Thoughts of renunciation remove craving, while thoughts of loving-kindness and compassion remove ill-will.



Threefold Refuge in The Triple Gem

When we wish to become Buddhists formally, the first step is to go to the Triple Gem (or the Three Jewels—the Buddha, the Dharma and the Sangha) for refuge. It is an expression of one's faith and determination in walking the Buddha's path. Since the time of the Buddha, taking the Threefold Refuge has identified a person as a Buddhist.

Why Take Refuge?

If we observe the world mindfully, we will notice much pain, suffering and frustration experienced by all. We will then look for a way to end these distressing conditions just as a traveller caught in

a storm seeks shelter. If he finds shelter in a strong and safe building, he will call out to the others struggling in the storm to join him in his refuge. Similarly, one chooses to become a Buddhist when he understands who the Buddha is and how the Triple Gem can provide him the way to end suffering. Out of compassion, he also encourages others to take the same refuge.

The Buddha, the Dharma and the Sangha are called the Triple Gem because they represent qualities excellent and precious like a gem. Once we recognise these unique qualities after careful consideration, and are confident that the Triple Gem can lead us towards True Happiness and Enlightenment, we take refuge in it. Therefore, it is not out of mere faith, but with an open-minded attitude and enquiring spirit that we begin practising the Buddha's teachings.

BUDDHA

The word "Buddha" means the "Fully Enlightened (Awakened) One". It is the title given to those who have attained supreme and perfect Enlightenment. Buddhists acknowledge the Buddha as the embodiment of the highest morality, deepest spiritual concentration, and most profound wisdom. The Buddha is also known to His followers as the "Perfected One" because He has eradicated all craving, aversion and ignorance. Having overcome all unwholesome actions, He has put an end to all suffering.

The Buddha is the "Fully Enlightened One" because He has realised the truth and sees things as they really are. He knows through His perfect wisdom, what is good and what is not good for everyone. Out of compassion, He shows us the path leading towards True Happiness.

The Buddha's exemplary conduct, perfect wisdom and great compassion make Him an excellent teacher. Using skilful means, He is able to reach out to all His followers such that they can understand His teachings.

The Buddha as Doctor

Refuge is likened to the doctor, medicine and nurse a sick person relies upon to be cured. We are like the sick as we are afflicted with the illness of having many unsatisfactory situations in life. Seeking a solution, we consult a qualified doctor, the Buddha, who diagnoses the causes of our spiritual illnesses, the disturbing attitudes and the confused actions we have done under their influence. He then prescribes the medicine of the Dharma—the teachings on how to gain the realisations leading to spiritual liberation.

DHARMA

The Buddha taught the Dharma (the teachings of the truth of all things) solely out of compassion, for all who suffer in the cycle of birth and death. The Dharma is therefore taught without any selfish motives. It is well taught and completely good, by nature pure and bright, like a light that destroys the darkness of ignorance. When the Dharma is studied and practised, it brings many benefits both now and in the future.

The Dharma is the teaching about the nature of life. These primary teachings of the Buddha are contained in the collection of scriptures called the *Tripitaka*. These consist of the sermons *(Sutra Pitaka)* taught by the Buddha, the disciplinary rules *(Vinaya Pitaka)* and the philosophy and psychology of Buddhism *(Abhidharma Pitaka)*.

We get to know about the Dharma by studying

the scriptures. We can also learn from the writings and explanations of qualified teachers. Once we have familiarised ourselves with the Dharma through reading and listening, we have to realise its truth for ourselves by putting it into practice. This means purifying our conduct and cultivating our minds till the teachings become part of our own experience.

The Dharma as Medicine

We must practise the Dharma, which is like the medicine the Buddha gave us, to attain Enlightenment. It is not enough just to learn the Dharma. We have to actively apply it in our daily lives and in our relationships with others too. This means we should try to be mindful when disturbing attitudes arise. Then, we apply the remedies which allow us to perceive the situation clearly. If the sick have medicine but do not use it, they will never be cured. Similarly, we may have

an elaborate shrine at home and a huge library of Dharma books, but if we, for example, do not apply patience when we meet someone who annoys us, we miss an immediate opportunity to practise the Dharma.

Sangha

The Sangha that Buddhists takes refuge in is the community of noble monks and nuns who lead exemplary lives, and who have attained insight into the true nature of things. Their lives and achievements show others that it is possible to progress on the path to Enlightenment.

However, the Sangha also refers to the fourfold community of ordinary monks and nuns, and spiritually excellent male and female lay followers, though "Sangha" is usually used to address those who have renounced the lay life to study, practise and teach the Dharma full time. Monks and nuns

are respected for their good conduct and experience in spiritual practice. They are also respected for their diligence in seeking Enlightenment. Wise and learned Sangha members are able teachers of the Dharma, like trusted friends who inspire us along the path of practice.

The lay followers accept the Four Noble Truths and the other teachings of the Buddha, and seek True Happiness and Enlightenment as their common goal in life. They also uphold common moral values. Thus a Buddhist can also look to diligent members of the lay community for help and advice in times of need.

The Sangha as Nurses

Members of the Sangha are like nurses who help us take the medicine of Dharma. Nurses remind us when we forget which pills to take. If we have difficulty swallowing huge pills, the nurses break

them into smaller pieces for us. Similarly, the Sangha advise us on how to practise the Dharma correctly when we are confused. Any fellow practitioner who is more advanced than us is a spiritual friend when they help us.

The Journey to Enlightenment

To better understand the idea of taking refuge, imagine a traveller who wants to visit a distant city where he has never been. He will need a guide, a path to follow and even travelling companions on the way. A Buddhist working towards attaining True Happiness and Enlightenment is like this traveller. The Buddha is his "guide," the Dharma his "path" and the Sangha his "travelling companions".

Taking Refuge

The simplest expression of one's intention of taking the Threefold Refuge in the Triple Gem as refuge is by repeating the following lines thrice:

I go to the Buddha for refuge.
I go to the Dharma for refuge.
I go to the Sangha for refuge.

These lines can be repeated by one alone before an image of the Buddha or repeated line by line after a monk or nun. The formal ceremony is very simple, but it is the commitment that one has in the heart that truly matters. A Buddhist may repeat the Threefold Refuge daily to remind oneself that one has made a commitment to attain the goal of True Happiness and Enlightenment through the guidance and inspiration of the Triple Gem.

Benefits of Taking Refuge

Taking the Threefold Refuge is the first step on the path to Enlightenment. Thereafter, through Moral Conduct and Mental Development, self-mastery, wisdom and compassion is achieved. Even if Enlightenment is not achieved in this life, one who takes the Threefold Refuge is more likely to have favourable conditions for encountering the Triple Gem again, aiding the attaining of Enlightenment in a future life.



The Five Precepts

The Five Precepts are recommendations given by the Buddha, proposed to be lived by one who wishes to lead a peaceful life while contributing to the happiness of family and society. The Five Precepts are voluntarily observed. They are not "commandments" that have to be abided by without question. They form the basis of universal morality in the Moral Conduct aspect of the Noble Eightfold Path, which is very important as the foundation of practising the Buddhist path.

Are Precepts Fixed Rules?

Following the precepts blindly without wisdom

or understanding is never encouraged. The Five Precepts should never be adhered to blindly by disregarding the circumstances. There are sometimes exceptional occasions when upholding them might prove unwise, as it creates more suffering for others. During such times, the Five Precepts might have to be "bent" in letter. For instance, we might have to tell white lies to protect someone in danger—this is "bending" the Fourth Precept, which is against lying. Whenever any of the Five Precepts is not upheld, it should only be for the welfare of others and not for selfish gain.

What are the Benefits of Precepts?

The Buddha once told a priest that it is much better to "sacrifice" one's unwholesome conduct by observing the Five Precepts than to kill animals as sacrificial offerings to the gods. He taught that observing the precepts not only expresses

one's gratitude for present good fortune, but also increases the opportunity for happiness and good fortune in the future. One who mindfully observes these five training guidelines of wholesome conduct will find peace in everyday life and is unlikely to bring trouble upon oneself or others.

Are the Five Precepts Hard to Observe?

The Five Precepts are never meant to restrict as they protect oneself and others when observed well. Breaking a precept is not considered an unforgivable "sin"—it is simply seen as an unskilful act due to the lack of wisdom. A Buddhist may find the Five Precepts difficult to observe completely and constantly in the beginning, but one should not be disheartened. Even if one is able to observe only one or two precepts successfully, one is already laying the foundation for happiness for now and the future. One may

make a daily renewal of one's determination to observe the precepts in order to remind oneself of the ideal moral life one should lead. Trying one's best to achieve this ideal, one will discover inner peace and always be at ease with the world. We have to remember that though we are presently imperfect, we can all strive towards perfection.

How to Take the Five Precepts

To express one's resolution to observe the Five Precepts, a Buddhist may recite them before a Buddha image or repeat them after a monk or nun. The ceremony for receiving the precepts is usually after the ceremony of taking the Threefold Refuge.

What are some Other Precepts?

All other sets of Buddhist precepts, including the Eight Precepts (Precepts for lay Buddhist training

during retreats), the Bhikshu and Bhikshuni Precepts (Precepts of Monks and Nuns) and the Bodhisattva Precepts (Precepts to benefit as many as possible) are further extensions of these Five Precepts.

– The First Precept –

Respect for Life:
Not to Kill ; To Protect

I undertake the training rule
to abstain from taking life
(so that I will practise compassion
by protecting and benefiting all life)

Aware of the suffering caused by the destruction of life, I undertake the precept to cultivate compassion and protect humans and animals. I am determined not to kill or injure, not to let others do so, and not to support any act of physical or mental harm.

– The Second Precept –

Respect for Personal Property:
Not to Steal ; To be Generous

I undertake the training rule
to abstain from taking what is not given
*(so that I will practise Generosity by sharing
or giving my material and spiritual wealth)*

Aware of the suffering caused by exploitation, injustice, theft and oppression, I undertake the precept to cultivate compassion for the well-being of people and animals. I will practise honesty and generosity by sharing my wealth, time, energy, empathy, encouragement and other resources, especially the gift of truth (the Dharma), with those in need. I am determined not to possess or steal anything (including time—by being late or shirking work...) that should belong to others. I will respect the property of others and the public,

and prevent others from profiting from the suffering of living beings.

– The Third Precept –

Respect for Personal Relationships:
Not to Indulge the Senses ; To be Content

I undertake the training rule
to abstain from misconduct
regarding objects of sense pleasures,
(especially adultery,
so that I will practise contentment
and channel my energies
towards spiritual development)

Aware of the suffering caused by sexual misconduct, I undertake the precept to cultivate responsibility and protect the safety and integrity of individuals, couples, families and society. I am determined not to engage in sexual relations without love,

responsibility and a long-term commitment. To preserve the happiness of others and myself, I will respect the commitments of others. I will do what I can to protect children from sexual abuse and prevent couples and families from being broken by sexual misconduct.

Aware of the suffering caused by sensual indulgence, I will also not mindlessly indulge my senses of sight, hearing, smell, taste, touch and/or mind in the sense pleasures (e.g. shows, music, food, sex etc.) such that I am distracted from the path of self-improvement.

– The Fourth Precept –

Respect for Truth:
Not to Lie ; To be Truthful

I undertake the training rule
to abstain from false speech
*(and other unwholesome modes of speech,
so that I will communicate positively)*

Aware of the suffering caused by unmindful speech and the inability to listen to others, I undertake the precept to cultivate loving speech and deep listening to bring joy and happiness to others, so as to relieve them of their suffering. I will speak truthfully, with words that inspire self-confidence, joy and hope. I am determined not to spread news, criticise or condemn that which I do not know for certain. I will refrain from uttering words that can cause division or discord in family or community. I will make the effort to reconcile, and to resolve conflicts big and small.

– The Fifth Precept –

Respect for Mental and Physical Well-being:
Not to Take Intoxicants ; To be Mindful

I undertake the training rule
to abstain from taking alcohol,
and that which causes intoxication
*(so that I will be more healthy and
not break any precept by loss of mindfulness)*

Aware of the suffering caused by unmindful consumption, I undertake the precept to cultivate good physical and mental health, for myself, my family and society, by practising mindful eating, drinking and consuming. I will ingest only items that preserve peace, well-being and joy in body and mind, and the collective body and consciousness of my family and society. I am determined not to use alcohol, drugs or any other intoxicant, or to ingest foods or items that

contain negative elements, so as to cultivate greater awareness, attention and clarity of mind. I am aware that to damage my body or my mind with these poisons is to let my family and society down. I will work to transform violence, fear, anger and confusion in myself and society by balancing my physical and mental diets. I understand that a proper diet is crucial for positive transformation of myself and society, for advancement in Mental Development.

(This precept is sometimes interpreted as either total abstinence from alcohol, or as "permitting" moderate intake, so long as there is no indulgence of the senses or impairment of health or mindfulness. The best safeguard however, is total abstinence, which best sustains mindfulness in following the first four precepts. E.g. If one never takes any alcohol, one can never be drunk.)



The Three Universal Characteristics

What are The Three Characteristics?

A universal characteristic is a truth of the universe that is connected with all existence despite differences in space and time. It tells us about the true nature of all things. The Buddha taught that all conditioned existence is governed by the Three Universal Characteristics. They are also called the Three Seals of Dharma (or the Three Marks of Existence), as the Buddha taught that any teaching that abides by these characteristics

could be validated as a true teaching. Any teaching that does not bear these three seals and the Four Noble Truths cannot be said to be a teaching of the Buddha. (4. below is taught as the third characteristic in place of 3. in the Mahayana tradition of Buddhism; 3. is taught as the third characteristic in the Theravada tradition.) To attain True Happiness or Enlightenment, these truths must be realised as they help us to touch reality:

1. *Anicca*—Impermanence (Change)
   All compounded things are constantly changing
2. *Anatta*—Selflessness (Non-self or Impersonality)
   All phenomena is without fixed self-nature
3. *Dukkha*—Dissatisfaction (Suffering)
   All unenlightened experience is dissatisfactory
4. *Nirvana*—Enlightenment (Perfect peace)
   Enlightenment is experience of everlasting peace and True Happiness

Relation of the Characteristics

Whatever is constantly changing (first characteristic) is without an independent self (second characteristic). This leads to suffering (third characteristic) when we are attached to them. Nirvana (4.) is the state of peace unaffected by 1-3.

Anicca

Anicca describes phenomena from the point of view of time. Everything in the universe, be it physical (from the smallest cells of our bodies to the largest stars) or mental (such as the thoughts running through our minds), constantly undergo change, never staying the same for even just two consecutive split seconds. As everything is a result or effect of changing causes and conditions, everything changes constantly.

The smallest component of the most seemingly "solid" thing is but a fluctuating ball of energy. The untrained mind is even much more fickle and prone to change, having no stability of a fixed self-nature. All living and non-living elements are thus subject to decay and destruction. The law of *Anicca* is neutral and unbiased. It is ungoverned by any higher power—things naturally decay, as well as become renewed.

Why Realise Anicca?

When one realises that people (their personalities, interests, attitudes, appearances...) and life situations are constantly changing, one will approach each moment of a relationship with an open mind, being able to respond to each new situation without clinging to outdated conceptions. Relationships can thus develop fruitfully.

As success in life depends on one's ability to adapt

to changes in situations and to make the most of new arising opportunities, we will be more successful in all our undertakings if this truth is realised. We will also learn to better treasure our health, wealth and relationships, to live with less attachment while using our valuable present state of well-being to mindfully practise the path towards Enlightenment. It is also because of *Anicca* that we can transform suffering into True Happiness.

ANATTA

Anatta describes phenomena from the point of view of space. Everything in the universe is compounded or made up of parts, which are in turn made up of smaller and smaller parts. Each of these parts changes constantly—sometimes grossly but mostly subtly (to our senses). There is no single fixed component of anything that is not subject to change. A thing exists only when the

parts that constitute it come together. Thus, there is no fixed unchanging self within anything—this is called impersonality. It also means that everything is interconnected and interdependent upon one another. Nothing exists on its own as a separate self.

If a real or permanent self exists, one should be able to identify it. However, one's body changes unceasingly from second to second from birth to death. The mind changes even much more rapidly. Thus, we cannot say the body, mind or any particular combination of the two is one's self. Neither can an independent self exist, as both the body and mind depend on many factors to exist. As the so-called self is just a collection of conditioned and changing physical and mental factors, there is no real or concrete element of self in us.

If the body were the self, it would be able to

will or control itself to be strong and healthy. However, it grows tired, hungry and falls sick against its will. Likewise, if the mind was the self, it could do whatever it wished. But the mind often runs away from what it knows to be right to the wrong. It becomes disturbed, distracted and excited against its will. Therefore, neither the body nor mind can be the self.

Why Realise Anatta?

One who does not realise this truth will tend to be self-centred and egoistic. Not only will one feel constantly threatened by people and situations, one will also feel compelled to protect oneself, one's possessions, and even opinions, at any cost.

Realising this truth, it will be easier to grow, learn, develop, and be generous, kind and compassionate because one no longer needs to be constantly self-defensive. One will also deal with everyday

situations more effectively, aiding progress towards True Happiness and Enlightenment. As long as we assume we possess a self, the selfish "I-my-mine" attitude dominates our life and brings all kinds of problems.

Dukkha

Nothing in the universe is capable of giving us complete and lasting satisfaction. This is due to the constant change of everything (other than the Dharma) and the changing cravings of our untrained and conditioned mind. Even during the most pleasant experience, there is anxiety that the moment will not last long. Seeking lasting happiness in the constantly changing disturbs peace of mind, causing suffering. It also results in the suffering of repeated rebirths.

Why Realise Dukkha?

Understanding that dissatisfaction is universal and inevitable enables one to face the realities of life with calmness. One will be able to cope with ageing, sickness and death without becoming disheartened or desperate. It also encourages us to find the solution to the problem of dissatisfaction just as the Buddha did, to seek True Happiness or Enlightenment.

Nirvana

Nirvana is the ground of being, the substance of all that is. For example, a wave does not have to "die" in order to become water. Water is the substance of the wave. The wave is already water. We are also likewise. We carry in us the ground of interconnectedness—Nirvana, the "world" beyond birth and death, permanence and impermanence, self and non-self. Nirvana is the complete silencing

of concepts and phenomena—it is true peace. Nirvana is the ground of all that is, just as waves do not exist out of water. If you know how to touch the waves, you know how to touch water at the same time. Nirvana does not exist separate of *Anicca* and *Anatta*. If you know how to use them to touch reality, you touch Nirvana in the here and the now.

Nirvana is the transcendence of all notions. Birth and death are notions. Being and non-being are notions. In our daily lives, we have to deal with these relative realities. But if we touch life more deeply, reality will reveal itself in a different way. When you understand *Anicca* and *Anatta*, you are already free of much suffering and are in touch with Nirvana. Nirvana is not something you look for in the future. As a Dharma Seal, it is present in every one of the Buddha's teachings. Nirvana is not the absence of life. Nirvana can be found in this very life. Nirvana means the pacifying,

silencing or extinguishment of the fire of suffering. Nirvana teaches that we are already what we want to become within. We don't have to run after anything any more. We only need to return to ourselves and touch our true nature. When we do this, we will have real peace and joy.

Why Realise Nirvana?

Nirvana is the Buddhist "technical" term for Enlightenment—liberation from all suffering or True Happiness! If we want to become truly happy, Nirvana definitely has to be attained.



Karma

"Karma" means action. It refers to the intentional deeds we do with our body, speech and mind through action, talking and thinking. Karma is the law that every deed done, when given the conditions, will bear certain fruits.

How does Karma Work?

All deeds leave imprints or mental seeds on our consciousness, which ripen into our experiences when the appropriate conditions come together. For example, if we help someone with a kind heart, this action leaves a positive imprint on our mindstream. When conditions are suitable, this imprint will ripen in our receiving of help when we need it.

Karmic seeds are carried over with us from lifetime to lifetime. However, if we do not create the cause or Karma for something, we will not experience that result. If one does not plant a certain seed, that certain plant will not grow. The Buddha taught:

According to the seed that is sown,
So is the fruit you reap.
The doer of good will gather good result,
The doer of evil reaps evil result.
If you plant a good seed well,
Then you will enjoy the good fruits.

What are the Effects of Karma?

Karma affects our future rebirths and influences what we experience during our lives—how others treat us, our wealth, social status etc. Karma also affects our personality and character—our talents,

strong personality traits and habits. The kind of environment we are born into is also influenced by Karma.

We are according to what we have done.
We will be according to what we do.

What Kinds of Karma are There?

If an action brings pain and misery in the long term for oneself and others, it is unwholesome or negative Karma. And if it brings happiness, it is wholesome or positive Karma. Actions are not inherently good or bad—they are only so according to their motivations and the consequences they bring. Whatever happiness and fortune we experience in our lives comes from our own positive actions, while our problems result from our own negative actions.

How is Negative Karma Created?

There are ten unwholesome actions which should be avoided if one does not wish to create negative Karma.

1. Killing
2. Stealing
3. Sexual misconduct
4. Lying
5. Tale-bearing
6. Harsh speech
7. Idle talk
8. Craving (Greed)
9. Aversion (Anger)
10. Wrong views

How is Positive Karma Created?

There are ten wholesome actions which one ought to strive to do to create positive Karma. (The ten

wholesome actions also include the avoidance of the ten unwholesome actions.)

1. Charity
2. Self-restraint
3. Meditation
4. Reverence
5. Service
6. Sharing of merits
7. Rejoicing in others' merits
8. Hearing the Dharma
9. Teaching the Dharma
10. Straightening one's views

Can Karma be Created Together?

Karma is both collective and individual. Collective Karma is action done together as a group. For example, a group of people may kill together. The results of this action can be experienced together as a group, even in future lives. Yet each member

of the group thinks, speaks and acts differently, thus also creating individual Karma, the results of which only one will experience.

Who Controls Karma?

There is no one who decides the "rewards and punishments" for what we do. We create the causes of our actions, and we experience their results. We are responsible for our own experiences. The Buddha discovered the law of Karma; He did not create it. No one created this natural law. By teaching us the law of Karma, the Buddha showed us how to work within the functioning of cause and effect to avoid pain and attain True Happiness.

Is Everything Subject to Karma?

The law of Karma does not apply to "mindless" neutral actions such as walking, sitting or sleeping.

Such actions do not produce effects apart from the actions in themselves. However, Karma applies to the intentional thoughts one thinks. Similarly, accidents are considered neutral Karma because they are unintentional. However, we should always work towards increasing our mindfulness such that accidents do not occur.

Can Karma Change?

Karma is not inflexibly fixed—it is not fate or predestination. Intentional actions at some time or another produce their effects when favourable conditions exist. Though people in their present lives are experiencing the effects of their past actions (Karma), it is possible to change, reduce or increase the effects of these past actions through present actions and attitude, which can affect the immediate and future lives. Understanding the law of Karma helps one realise that we are whatever we make ourselves to be. We are entirely responsible for our destinies.

How do We Know Our Karma?

The Buddha gave us general guidelines about the results of various actions. For example, the Buddha taught us that killing causes a short life and that generosity results in wealth. However, only a Buddha's omniscient mind can understand the complete dynamics of Karma.

There is flexibility in the functioning of actions and their results. While we know that constantly insulting others, for example, brings us an unfortunate rebirth, just exactly what form we will be reborn into varies. If the action was very heavy—for example, with strong anger we repeatedly abused many people and felt gratified that we had hurt their feelings, the result will be more unpleasant than if we casually teased someone and later regretted our insensitivity. The conditions present at the time that karmic seed ripens also influence what specific results it brings.

Is Karma Always Fair?

When we see dishonest people who are wealthy, or cruel people who are powerful, or kind people who die young, we may doubt the law of Karma. But many of the results we experience in this life are the results of actions in previous lives, and some of the actions we do in this life will only ripen in future lives—this is called long-term Karma. (Short-term Karma is that which shows results within a short period of time.) The wealth of the dishonest might be the result of their generosity in past lives. Their current dishonesty is however, leaving karmic seeds to experience poverty in future lives. Likewise, the respect and authority given to cruel people is due to positive actions they did in the past. In the present, they are abusing their power, thus creating the cause for future pain. Those who die young are experiencing the result of negative actions such as killing done in past lives. However, their present kindness is

planting seeds or imprints on their mindstreams for them to experience happiness in the future.

Will We Surely Experience Negative karma?

When seeds, even small ones, are planted in the ground, they will eventually sprout—unless they do not receive the needed conditions for growth—such as water, sunlight and fertilisers. The ultimate way to uproot karmic imprints or seeds is by meditation on the Emptiness of inherent existence. This is the way to purify the disturbing attitudes and karmic imprints completely. At our level, this may be rather difficult, but we can still stop the harmful imprints from ripening by purifying them. This is like preventing the seed from receiving water, sunshine and fertilisers. Doing much good too can "dilute" the ill effects of negative Karma.

How can we Purify Negative Karma?

Purification is very important as it prevents future suffering and relieves guilt. By purifying our minds, we are able to have greater peace, and have better ability to understand the Dharma. The four opponent powers used to purify negative imprints or seeds are:

1. Regret
2. Determination to never repeat the action
3. Taking the Threefold Refuge
   and generating compassion towards others
4. Actual remedial practice
   (Positive action—
   including apologising, making possible amends, practising meditation and chanting)

The four opponent powers must be done repeatedly. As we have done many negative actions, we cannot expect to counteract all of

them at once. The stronger the four opponents powers are, the firmer our determination not to repeat the action and the more powerful the purification will be.

Does Karma Determine Who We Meet?

Yes—but this does not mean that all relationships are predetermined. We may have certain karmic predispositions to feel close to or to have friction with certain people, but this does not mean that our relationships with them will continue along the same lines. If we are kind to those who speak ill of us and try to communicate with them, the relationships will change, creating positive Karma that will bring happiness in the future.

We are not karmically bound to others—there are no special people who are the only ones for us. Since we have had many past lives, we have

had contact with every being at some point before. Our relationship with any particular person also changes constantly. However, past karmic connections can influence our present relationships. For example, if someone has been our spiritual mentor in a past life, we may be drawn to that person in this lifetime, and when he or she teaches us the Dharma, it may have a very strong effect on us.

If Others Suffer from Negative Karma, Can we Help Them?

We know what it is like to feel miserable, and that is exactly how others feel when they are experiencing the results of their own destructive actions. Out of empathy and compassion, we should definitely help. Though others created the causes to experience their difficulties, maybe they had also created the causes to receive help from

us! We are all alike in wanting happiness while trying to avoid pain. It does not matter whose pain or problem it is—we should try to relieve it. For example, to think, “The poor are poor because of their own past lives’ miserliness. I would be interfering with their Karma if I tried to help.” is a cruel misconception. We should never rationalise our own laziness, apathy or smugness by misinterpreting the law of cause and effect. Compassionate responsibility is important for our own spiritual development and world peace.



Rebirth in The Six Realms

Rebirth refers to one's mind taking on a new body upon death. Our mind refers to all of our formless emotional and cognitive experiences. While we are alive, the body and mind are linked, but at death, they separate. The body becomes a corpse, and the mind continues by taking on another body. To emphasise the continuity of changing consciousness, we use the word "mindstream" to refer to the mind. Each person has a mindstream.

When did Rebirth Begin?

Our mind, that carries over from life to life has no beginning—its continuity is infinite. Each moment of our mind is a continuation of the previous moment. Who we are and what we think and feel depends on who we were yesterday. Our present mind is a continuation of the past mind. One moment of our mind was caused by the previous moment of our mind. This continuity can be traced back to childhood and even to when we were a foetus in our mother's womb. Even before the time of conception, our mindstream existed in another body.

Using the example of a number line, looking left from position zero, there is no first negative number, and looking right, there is no highest last number—one more can always be added both ways. Likewise, our mindstream has no beginning or end. We all have had countless past rebirths,

and our minds will continue to exist infinitely. By purifying our mindstreams, we can make our future existence better and better.

What Causes Rebirth?

Although all sentient beings have the Buddha-nature (the potential to become Buddhas), their minds are clouded by ignorance since beginningless time. From ignorance (delusion) springs craving (greed) and aversion (hatred), which cause us to be continually greedy for life and its illusory pleasures while hating or rejecting death and other displeasures. Each moment of ignorance was produced from the preceding moment without a beginning. Although ignorance has no beginning, it can be eradicated through the attainment of wisdom in Enlightenment.

How does Rebirth Happen?

The sense consciousnesses that see, hear, smell, taste and feel tactile sensations, and the gross mental consciousness function actively while we are alive. When one is dying, they cease to function and are absorbed into the subtle mental consciousness.

The subtle mind bears the imprints of the actions we have done (Karma) with all the tendencies, preferences, abilities and characteristics that have been developed and conditioned in this life.

After death, the subtle mind leaves one body, enters the intermediate state and re-establishes itself in a fertilised egg in another body. After the subtle mind joins with another body at the moment of conception, the gross sense and mental consciousnesses reappear, and the person again sees, hears, thinks and so forth.

The subtle mind which goes from one life to the next, is a constantly changing phenomenon. It is not considered to be a soul or fixed personality. Thus the individual is reborn and develops a personality conditioned both by the mental characteristics that have been carried over and by the new environment. The personality will change and be modified by conscious efforts and conditioning factors like education, parental influence and society. At death, it re-establishes itself in a new fertilised egg.

This process of dying and being reborn will continue until the conditions that cause it, (craving, aversion and ignorance) cease. When they do, instead of being reborn, the mind attains a state called Nirvana (Enlightenment), which is release from all suffering.

How does the Mind Go from One Body to Another?

Our mindstreams are like radio waves, which is energy transmitted at different frequencies. Radio waves are transmitted, travel through space, are attracted to and picked up by the receiver with the same tuning and is broadcasted as music. It is similar with the mind. At death, mental energy travels through space, is attracted to and picked up by the fertilised egg. As the embryo grows, it centres itself in the brain, from where it "broadcasts" itself as the new personality.

Is Being Reborn Good?

The idea of rebirth can be very comforting as it offers chances to amend the mistakes you have made in this life, and gives time to further develop the skills and abilities you have nurtured in this life. If you fail to attain Enlightenment in this life, you will have the opportunity to try again next

time. If you have made mistakes in this life, you will be able to learn from your mistakes. Things you were unable to do or achieve in this life may well become possible in the next.

Ultimately, the aim of the Buddhist is to end the wheel of rebirth—to be released from the cycle of birth and death, which is repeated suffering. Out of compassion, one who is released (the enlightened) can also help to show others the path to liberation.

Can I Remember My Past Lives?

Our minds, being obscured by ignorance, find it difficult to remember the past. Also, many changes occur in our body and mind when we die and are reborn, making recollection difficult. Not remembering something does not mean that it does not exist—we sometimes even forget where we parked a car! However, some people can remember their past lives in meditation.

Must I Know My Past Lives?

What is more important to know is how we live our present life. Knowing what we were like in our past lives is useful only if it helps to generate determination to avoid negative actions or to free ourselves from rebirth. What is crucial is to purify our previous negative actions, avoid creating more, and put energy into accumulating positive potential by developing our good qualities.

If we want to know about our past lives, we only have to look at the state of our present life. If we want to know about our future lives, we only need to look at what we are doing right now. This is because we received our present rebirth as a result of our past actions. A human rebirth is a fortunate one, and we had created the cause for it by living ethically in our previous lives. On the other hand, our future rebirths will be determined by what we think, say and do now. Thus, we can get an idea of the kind of rebirths we will have by looking at

our present attitudes and examining whether they are constructive or destructive. We don't need to go to a fortune-teller to ask what will become of us—we can simply consider the imprints we are leaving on our mindstreams by our thoughts, words and deeds.

What Decides How I'm Reborn?

The most important factor influencing where we will be reborn and what sort of life we shall have is Karma—our intentional physical, verbal and mental actions. What we are now is determined very much by how we have thought and acted in the past. Likewise, how we think and act now will influence how we will be in the future.

A gentle loving person tends to be reborn in a heavenly realm or as a human who has a predominance of pleasant experiences. An extremely cruel person tends to be reborn in a hellish realm

or as a human who has a predominance of painful experiences. The person who develops obsessive craving, fierce longings, and burning ambitions that can never be satisfied tends to be reborn as a hungry ghost, or as a human frustrated by excess wanting. Whatever mental habits are strongly developed in this life will continue in the next life.

Can I Decide Where I'm Reborn?

Yes—that is why one of the steps on the Noble Eightfold Path is Right Effort. How we are reborn depends on how much energy we exert for transformation and how strong our habits are. Some simply go through life under the influence of their past habits, without making an effort to change. Such people will continue to suffer unless they change their negative habits. The longer the negative habits remain, the more difficult are they to change.

We should understand this and take advantage of each and every opportunity to break mental habits that have unpleasant results, and to develop mental habits that have pleasant and happy results. Meditation is one of the techniques for modifying the habitual patterns of the mind, training us to think, speak and act in kinder and wiser ways. The whole of the spiritual life is to train, so as to purify and free the mind.

An Example of Rebirth

If being patient and kind was a pronounced part of your character in your last life, such tendencies will re-emerge in the present life. If they are strengthened and developed in the present life, they will re-emerge even stronger and more pronounced in the future life. This is based upon the simple observable fact that long established habits tend to be difficult to break. If you are patient and kind, you tend to be not so easily

ruffled by others. As you do not hold grudges, people like you more. Thus, your experiences tend to be happier.

Or you might come into this life with the tendency to be patient and kind due to your mental habits in the past life. If in the present life you neglect to strengthen and develop them, they would gradually weaken and die out, and perhaps be completely absent in the future life. In this case, there is a possibility that in either this life or the next, a short temper, anger and cruelty could grow and develop, bringing with them all the unpleasant experiences that such attitudes create.

However, if you came into the present life with the tendency to be short-tempered and angry, and realise that such habits only cause you unpleasantness, you can make an effort to replace them with positive emotions. If you eliminate them completely, you become free from the

unpleasantness caused by being ill-tempered. If you are only able to weaken such tendencies, they will re-emerge in the next life, where with more effort, they can be completely eliminated—freeing you from their unpleasant effects.

Is there Proof of Rebirth?

Not only is there scientific proof to support the Buddhist belief in rebirth, it is the only after-life theory that has strong supportive evidence. During the last forty years, parapsychologists have been studying reports of some people who have vivid memories of their former lives.

For example, in England, a 5-year-old girl said she could remember her "other mother and father", and she described clearly what sounded like the events in the life of another person. Parapsychologists were called in and they asked her hundreds of questions to which she gave

answers. She spoke of living in a particular village in what appeared to be Spain, giving the name of the village, the name of the street she lived in, her neighbours' names and details about her everyday life there. She also tearfully spoke of how she was struck by a car, dying of her injuries two days later. When these details were checked, they were found to be accurate. There was a village in Spain with the name the girl had given. There was a house of the type she had described on the street she named. What is more, it was found that a twenty-three year old woman living in the house had been killed in a car accident five years before. Now how is it possible for a 5-year-old girl living in England, and who had never been to Spain to know all these details? Of course, this is not the only case of this kind.

For example, Professor Ian Stevenson of the University of Virginia's Department of Psychology has described dozens of such cases in his books.

He is an accredited scientist whose decades of investigation of those who remember former lives present very strong evidence for the Buddhist teaching of rebirth.

What does Rebirth Explain?

Karma and rebirth together explain many otherwise "unsolved" mysteries:

- Inequality of humans and their experiences (Even twins are different in character)
- Talents of geniuses and child prodigies
- Spontaneous arising of instinctive likes and dislikes in infants
- Intellectual differences between parents and their children
- Sudden outbursts of emotion and changes in character
- Untimely death and unexpected changes in fortune

Do any Scientists Believe in Rebirth?

Thomas Huxley, who was responsible for having science introduced into the 19th century British school system, and who was the first scientist to defend Darwin's theories, believed that rebirth is a very plausible idea. In his famous book *Evolution and Ethics and other Essays*, he said:

"In the doctrine of transmigration, whatever its origin, ...Buddhist speculation found, ready to hand, the means of constructing a plausible vindication of the ways of the cosmos to human... Yet this plea of justification is not less plausible than others; and none but very hasty thinkers will reject it on the ground of inherent absurdity. Like the doctrine of evolution itself, that of transmigration has its roots in the world of reality; and it may claim such support as the great argument from analogy is capable of supplying."

Professor Julian Huxley, the distinguished British scientist who was Director General of UNESCO believed that rebirth is in harmony with scientific thinking. He said:

"There is nothing against a... surviving spirit-individuality being in some way given off at death, as a definite wireless message is given off by a sending apparatus working in a particular way. But it must be remembered that the wireless message only becomes a message again when it comes in contact with a new, material structure—the receiver. So with our possible spirit (consciousness)-emanation. It... would never think or feel unless again 'embodied' in some way. Our personalities are so based on body that it is really impossible to think of survival which would be in any true sense personal without a body of sorts... I can think of something being given off which would bear the same relation to men and women as a wireless message to the transmitting apparatus; but in that case the dead would, so far as one can

see, be nothing but disturbances of different patterns wandering through the universe until... they came back to actuality of consciousness by making contact with something which could work as a receiving apparatus for mind."

Where Can I be Reborn?

The Buddha taught that there are six realms of existence (Samsara—this world with prevalent suffering) that we are continually reborn into. These six realms correspond to the six general mindstates that we fall into time and again due to craving, aversion and ignorance. These six worlds are physically existent in our world and other dimensions—some seen and others unseen. They are worlds manifested through the force of Karma of sentient beings. The six realms are also psychological worlds (mindstates) that we repeatedly get in and out of in this life, or even in one single day. None of these six realms are

permanent—not even heaven or hell. The moment the Karma for one's existence in that world exhausts, one is reborn accordingly to the residual karmic forces. The first three worlds are called the lower realms—where greater suffering dominates. The other three worlds are called the higher realms—where there is generally more happiness, though suffering still exists. None of these worlds is a safe refuge—not even the realm of gods. All Buddhas have broken free of rebirth in the six realms, though they can choose to manifest into any of them out of compassion to teach the Dharma. The six realms of existence are:

1. Realm of hell beings
2. Realm of hungry ghosts
3. Realm of animals
4. Realm of humans
5. Realm of demi-gods
6. Realm of gods

What is the Realm of Hell?

Hell is a horrible dimension of great pain and torment, where its beings are subjected to the most excruciating tortures inflicted by demons and beasts. The fiery heat of the hot hells corresponds to the passionate intensity of hatred and fear, while the freezing temperatures of the cold hells correspond to the cruelty of cold-hearted immoral apathy. Hell collectively consists of sub-planes, each of which "specialises" in particular forms of karmic expression appropriate to the type of one's unwholesome actions. Beings in hell either burn with rage or are tortured by fear and anxiety. They do not realise that their torturers are manifestations of their own guilty minds. The duration of life in hell also feels unbearably long for most.

Hell in Our World

A World War can be the equivalent of hell on Earth, where violence, hatred and fear seems

"everywhere". Being forced to face strong personal phobias such as flying in a plane or entering an unknown place can also be hellish experiences.

Am I a Hell-Being?

"Human hell-beings" might live life habitually seeing the world as full of dangerous strangers out to get take their advantage. Everyone seems to be constantly threatening. Their prime motivation is to eliminate or evade their menaces, as they are in a state of open enmity with all they encounter. They suffer agonies of insecurity and feel the pain and humiliation of imagined wrongs. Because of how they behave towards others, they bring into being the enemies they imagine. Hell-beings are dominated by the mental state of guilt, hatred, fear and even violence. They live in hell in this world as they make every situation a place of torment for themselves. If one is to die tuned to this mindstate, one is likely to be reborn in hell.

What is the Realm of Hungry Ghosts?

The dimension of hungry ghosts consists of phantom-like beings personifying great craving. Tormented by unfulfilled desires and insatiable demands of impossible satisfaction, they fail to see the impossibility of getting something that has already passed on. Their ghost-like state represents their attachment to the past. Although impossibly hungry and thirsty, they cannot eat or drink without causing themselves terrible pain or indigestion. Their long thin throats are so raw and narrow that swallowing produces unbearable burning. Their bloated bellies are also unable to retain nourishment.

Hungry Ghosts in Our World

A "human hungry ghost" could be a miser who lives for more and more money at the expense of

everything else, falsely believing that it will bring him True Happiness. Another hungry ghost could be a drug addict who can barely keep himself alive, who is only concerned with getting his next high, the effects of which soon fade away, leaving him longing for another. Two neurotically dependent lovers might also be hungry ghosts if they keep trying to gain something from the other, which the other also lacks.

Am I a Hungry Ghost?

Some are so possessed by neurotic craving and longing out of feeling empty, that they live only to gather material things or emotional experiences for themselves. Even if they get what they want, it gives them little pleasure. No matter what they possess, they always feel that there is something missing. They crave for certain experiences to feel real and substantial, distracting themselves momentarily from their repressions and lack of

spirituality. Such people are dominated by the mental state of craving. If one is to die tuned to this mindstate, one is likely to be reborn as a hungry ghost.

What is the Realm of Animals?

The world of animals is motivated by the instinctive gratification of the biological drives of hunger and sexuality. All endeavours are directed to the satisfaction of physical desires and self-preservation. Most animals are ignorant of, or are unable to see beyond the natural "needs" of the body.

Animals in Our World

A human can be reborn as a certain animal if one's character or habits resemble it. "Human animals" also exist in our world. For instance, a couch potato who only eats, sleeps or "pigs out"

before the television all day might gradually come to resemble a pig, a human "good-for-nothing" who is lazy and unproductive. While a viciously jealous and easily suspicious person could be miserably small and thin, resembling a poisonous snake in appearance and nature.

Am I an Animal?

The "human animal" is one who wilfully refuses to look at the meaning and purpose of life. His bodily needs for nourishment, sleep and sex might be reasonable and he does get satisfaction from them. However, their fulfilment becomes ends in themselves. For him, life has no other significance. Though he is ignorant in that he fails to see any higher noble destiny, he is not necessarily stupid in the practical sense. But he has no ideals, having nothing beyond himself which he lives for. He lives without a spiritual vision, when he can choose to cultivate his mind. Such a person is

dominated by the mental state of ignorance. One who dies tuned to this mindstate is likely to be reborn as an animal.

What is the Realm of Human Beings?

The human realm is the world of our everyday experience. It "contains" all the other realms of existence that humans create for themselves.

Humans in Our World

This is the realm where most individuals search for self-actualisation. Many humans are fundamentally unsure about the nature of various matters—including their true identity. But it is in this world that transcendental insight into the true nature of oneself can be attained. This is the world where the individual can be mindful enough to be aware of the state of dissatisfaction, and to seek liberation from the wheel of life and death.

Am I a Human?

A true human is one who realises one's special position and treasures it, for it is not easy to be reborn human. We must not take this life for granted by not realising its significance. The human realm is a highly favourable realm as it contains a mix of pleasure and pain—giving us ample opportunity to realise the true nature of life. Rebirth in the other realms is unsatisfactory as the almost constant pain in the lower realms is demoralising, while overwhelming pleasures in the higher realms can lead to spiritual complacency. Humans are plagued by all three poisons of craving, aversion and ignorance to various extent. In this precious life, one can either be reborn into any of the six realms or free oneself from rebirth.

What is the Realm of Demi-Gods?

The realm of the demi-gods *(asuras)* in the lower heavens consists of ferocious, ugly and jealous male demi-gods, who are in constant battle with the realm of gods for greater power and happiness. They embody the ego's striving for power. They never win as the gods themselves had created the Karma to be able to enjoy their position. The female demi-gods are no less jealous and acquisitive, but they win their wars not by force, but by seduction and enchantment. Demi-gods are almost god-like in their power and vigour, but they are not happy. Others' success, possessions and qualities make them feel enviously belittled. The deep contentment which others gain from their good fortune tempts them to struggle violently to grab it for themselves.

Demi-Gods in Our World

"Human demi-gods" are not uncommon in the arenas of politics, business, organised crime and other walks of life, where many already relatively well-to-do people continually try to win each other in every aspect of life—be it in career positions, possessions of material wealth or even family. This is often done at a drastic price—even at the costs of close friendships.

Am I a Demi-God?

Demi-gods are always trying to be cleverer, stronger, richer or more experienced than others. Each watches for others to weaken so that one can seize power for oneself. Although always trying to prove their superiority, they are very conscious of hierarchy and tend to form power structures, allying with others to scheme against others—ultimately for their own benefit. They are able to

relate to others only on the basis of dominance or submission, not as equals, and where they can, they will dominate. Backstabbing and conspiring are common. A human can be reborn as a demi-god if one is egoistic and power-crazy. However, one would also need positive Karma to be reborn as a demi-god as it requires much merits. Such a person is however dominated by the mental state of jealousy, rendering one's merits to be without wisdom. One who dies tuned to this mindstate is likely to be reborn as a demi-god.

What is the Realm of Gods?

The realm of the gods or the higher heavens are various planes of increasingly refined sensual bliss and gratification. Gods are able to enjoy beauty by their own goodness. They are beings with beautiful subtle bodies, who delight in music and dance, and exist in extended peak experiences, in which one dissolves into the experience of

pleasure, temporarily crossing the boundaries of ego. Such experiences can be cultivated in meditation. If they are indulged in, they can induce spiritual complacency with what is only temporary. After a long time, when their merits are depleted, the gods fall from their state of bliss. Unless they realise their impermanence and start living the spiritual life, they will be reborn into the lower realms.

Gods in Our World

"Human gods" such as kings and queens in earlier times live royal lives full of wealth and power. They were able to satisfy most material desires at their command. In our times, these are the rich, famous and powerful who move about with an air of opulence and majesty far above the common person. However, they are often somewhat spoilt by extravagance and luxury.

Am I a God?

A god is one who has great power in position. One's wishes for material wants are easily granted. Because one's position was achieved through accumulation of much positive Karma, one can indeed enjoy the well-being deserved. Revelling in pleasure, one tends to forget that one's state is not everlasting, and that there are many other unfortunate beings that one can help. A human can be reborn as a god if one is highly virtuous. Such a person however, might be dominated by spiritual complacency, if much goodness was created without realisation of wisdom and the importance of living the spiritual life. One who dies tuned to this mindstate is likely to be reborn as a god.



The Four Immeasurable Minds

Everyone wants to be happy, but happiness cannot be achieved in isolation. The happiness of one depends upon the happiness of all and the happiness of all depends on the happiness of one. This is because all life is interdependent. In order to be happy, one needs to cultivate wholesome attitudes towards others.

The systematic way of cultivating wholesome attitudes towards all beings is through meditation. Among the many topics of meditation taught by the Buddha, there are four specifically concerned with the cultivation of loving-kindness, compassion, appreciative joy and equanimity. These qualities

are called the Four Immeasurables because they are directed to an immeasurable number of sentient beings, and because the wholesome Karma produced through practising them is immeasurable. The Four Immeasurables make up "True Love", which brings joy to ourselves and to the ones we love. If our love does not bring joy to all unconditionally, it is not True Love. In True Love, there is no sense of ourselves being separate from others.

By cultivating the wholesome attitudes of loving-kindness, compassion, appreciative joy and equanimity, we can gradually remove ill-will, cruelty, jealousy and desire. In this way, they help achieve happiness for one and all, now and in the future.

Loving-Kindness

Loving-kindness is the wish that all beings, without any exception, be well and happy. Loving-kindness counters ill-will (aversion). The attitude

of loving-kindness is like the feeling which a mother has for her newborn son. She wishes that he may enjoy good health, have good friends, be intelligent, and be successful in all that he attempts. In short, she wishes sincerely that he could be happy. One may have the same attitude of loving-kindness for a particular friend or for others in one's family or community.

The extent of loving-kindness in the instances above is limited to those for whom one has some attachment or concern. The meditation on loving-kindness however, requires one to extend loving-kindness not only towards those whom one feels close to, but also to others whom one may know only slightly or not know at all. Finally, one's loving-kindness is extended to beings in all the realms of existence. Only then does the ordinary wholesome attitude of loving-kindness found in daily life become sublime and immeasurable.

Compassion

Compassion is the wish for all beings to be free from suffering. It is the intention and capacity to relieve and transform suffering, and to lighten sorrows while countering cruelty. When a mother, for example, sees her son seriously ill, she will naturally be moved by compassion and earnestly act such that he may be free from the suffering of his sickness. In the same way, most people have experienced the feeling of compassion upon seeing the suffering of a relative or friend. To become a sublime state of mind, compassion has to reach beyond the limited group of individuals whom one cares for. Compassion has to be extended to all beings to become immeasurable.

Appreciative Joy

Appreciative joy is the wholesome attitude of rejoicing in the happiness and virtues of others. It counters jealousy and makes us less self-centred.

Appreciative joy may be experienced by a mother's joy at her son's success and happiness in life. In the same way, almost everyone will have at one time or another experienced the feeling of joy at the good fortune of a friend. These are the commonly experienced forms of appreciative joy. When one meditates on appreciative joy, it is extended to all beings—not just to loved ones. Only then does one experience appreciative joy as a sublime and immeasurable state of mind.

Equanimity

Equanimity is the attitude of regarding all beings as equals, irrespective of their present relationship to oneself. While equanimity counters craving and aversion, it is not cold or indifferent—it is love that is impartial and without prejudice.

When a grown-up son settles down with his own family, he begins to lead an independent life with responsibilities of his own. Although his mother still has her feelings of loving-kindness, compassion and appreciative joy towards him, they are now combined with the new feeling of equanimity. She recognises his new life of independent responsibility and does not cling to him.

To become a sublime state of mind, the attitude of equanimity has to be extended to all beings. To do this, one needs to remember that one's

relationships with one's relatives, friends and even enemies, are the results of previous Karma. Thus one should not cling to relatives and friends while regarding others with indifference or hatred. Moreover, one's relatives and friends in this life may have been one's enemies in a past life and may again become enemies in the future, while one's enemies in this life may well have been one's relatives and friends in the past, and may again become one's relatives and friends in the future.



Dependent Origination

The Buddha often taught in terms of dependent origination. Through the understanding of dependent origination, the Buddha attained Enlightenment. He said, "Deep indeed is dependent origination. It is by not realising this principle that all have become entangled like a ball of thread, unable to stop suffering and rebirth." The following is a brief introduction of dependent origination.

The Law of Dependent Origination

The basis of dependent origination is that life and the world is built on sets of relations, in which the arising and cessation of factors depend on other

factors which condition them:

When this is, that is.
This arising, that arises.
When this is not, that is not.
This ceasing, that ceases.

"This" (Certain Causes) + Certain Conditions = "That"

On this principle of interdependence and relativity rests the arising, continuity and cessation of existence. This is called the law of dependent origination. It emphasises that all phenomena in the universe are relatively conditioned states, which do not arise independent of supportive conditions. A phenomenon arises because combinations of causes and conditions are present to support its arising. And the phenomenon will cease when the conditions and components supporting its arising change and no longer sustain it. The presence of these supportive conditions, in turn depends

on other factors for their arising, sustenance, disappearance and possible re-arising. In this sense, all things are empty of an independent self-nature. This law also explains how Karma and rebirth work.

An Example of Dependent Origination

To illustrate the nature of dependent origination of the things around us, consider an oil lamp. The flame in an oil lamp burns dependent upon the air, oil, heat and wick. When all these are present, the flame burns. If one of these elements is absent, the flame will cease to burn. Thus, all phenomena arise dependently upon a number of causal factors, and not independently. This is the principle of dependent origination.

Dependent Origination and Relativity

The law of dependent origination is a realistic way of understanding the universe. The fact that everything is nothing more than a set of complex relations is consistent with modern scientific views (such as Einstein's theory of relativity and the quantum theory). Since everything is conditioned, relative and interdependent, there is nothing in this world that can be regarded as a permanent entity with a permanent identity. Things are what they are, only in relation to other things.

For example, one is not independently or by nature a father—one becomes a father because of his relation to his son. A man who is a father to his son is also a son to his father. His identity is relative and depends upon his relation to another person. Terms like long and short, high and low,

mother and child etc. are relative, and only make sense in relation to other things. Relativity also means that because each thing does not exist independently, it does not have an unchanging nature of its own with any inherent meaning.

The world is built on a set of interlinking relations, but normally, we create false pictures of its permanency in our minds because of our defilements. For example, it is "natural" to cling to what we consider beautiful or desirable, and to reject what is ugly and undesirable. Being subjected to the forces of craving (greed) and aversion (hatred), we are misled by ignorance (delusion). We do not realise that likes and dislikes are relative, dependently-arisen and illusory.

An Interesting Conversation on Dependent Origination

The following is from a conversation on the subject between students and a teacher: (Ven: Venerable; Aud: Audience)

WHERE IS THE CRACKER?

Ven: (Holding a cracker) A cracker appears to be a real cracker as there is some "cracker-ness" about it—it seems to exist "out there," independent of our mind. If it really exists like that, then when we analyse and search for just what the cracker is, we should be able to find it. (The cracker is broken and a piece is held up) Is this piece a cracker?

Aud: Yes.

Ven: (Holding up the other piece) Is this a cracker?

Aud: Yes.

Ven: (Crumbles the cracker pieces) What is this now?

Aud: Crumbs—a mess!

Ven: There is no cracker now? What happened to the real cracker we saw before? If it had some cracker-ness quality to it, where is it now? What we have now are the same atoms and molecules as before—but we call these crumbs and not a cracker!

If there was some inherent cracker, we should have been able to find it—either amongst its parts or separate from its parts—but it isn't anywhere. This means there was no inherent cracker to start with.

Aud: The cracker is the collection of atoms and molecules. It is all the parts together!

Ven: But a collection is just a group of parts. If none of the parts by themselves are a cracker, then how can many parts together be an independent cracker with some cracker-ness

quality? If you put many non-butterflies, such as grasshoppers together, does that make a butterfly? How can a group of non-crackers or crumbs make a real cracker?

Aud: Then there is no cracker at all? What am I eating?

Ven: What we are searching for is something that is a cracker independent of its parts. That real independent cracker can't be found because it doesn't exist. But a dependently-existent cracker is there! What you are eating is still a cracker!

The cracker exists as a group of atoms and molecules put together in a certain pattern. Our mind looks at it and conceives it to be a thing and calls it a cracker. It becomes a cracker because all of us together have conceived it in a similar way and agreed, by the force of social convention, to call it a cracker.

That cracker exists dependent on its causes and conditions—the flour, water, baker and so on. It depends on our minds conceiving it to be a thing and labelling it a "cracker". Apart from this dependently-existent cracker, there is no other cracker. It is empty of being a cracker inherently and independently with some cracker-ness quality to it. It exists—but not in the same way it appears to us to exist. It appears to be independent when it isn't.

WHERE IS THE SELF?

Ven: The same is true for our "self" or "I". Recall a time when you were very angry. How did "I" appear then? It seemed very solid—as if there was a real me that someone was insulting. That "I" felt real, as if it were independent, somewhere inside our body and mind. We get angry in order to defend that "I" which seems so real. If that solid,

independent "I" exists as it appears to us, we should be able to find it, either among our body and mind or separate from them. There is no other place such an "I" could be. Let's see. Are you your body?

Aud: Yes.

Ven: Which part of your body are you? Are you your arm? Your chest? Your little toe? Your brain? It's clear that we aren't any of the parts of our body. Let's try again. Are you your mind?

Aud: I must be.

Ven: Which mind are you? Are you your visual consciousness? Your auditory consciousness? Your mental consciousness? Are you one particular characteristic? If you were your angry self, you would always be angry!

Aud: "I" am what goes from one life to the next.

Ven: But what goes from one life to the next is constantly changing. Can you point to one moment of your mind that always has been and always will be you? Are you yesterday's mind? Today's mind? Tomorrow's mind?

Aud: I'm all of them together.

Ven: But that's a collection of parts, none of which is "I". To say that collection is "I" is like saying a group of grasshoppers is a butterfly.

Maybe you're completely separate from your body and mind. That is, can you take away your body and mind, and can you ("I") still remain independently? If the "I" is separate from the body and mind, my body and mind could be here and "I" could be across the room. Is that possible?

The "I" or self doesn't exist independently of the body and mind. It is not the body

and it is not the mind. Neither is it the body and mind together. In other words, the solid "I" that we feel when we're angry doesn't exist at all. This is what is meant by selflessness—there is no ultimately existent or independent self. That doesn't mean the "I" doesn't exist at all. What we are negating is its independent or inherent existence. There is a conventionally existent "I" that is angry and that "I" does not exist independently.

The "I" depends on causes and conditions—the coming together of the sperm and egg of our parents, our consciousness from a previous life and so on. The "I" also depends on the parts which compose it— our body and mind. The "I" also depends on concepts and labels. That is, on the basis of our body and mind being together, we conceive of a person and label it "I". "I" exist by being merely labelled on a suitable basis—as body and/or mind.

HOW UNDERSTANDING DEPENDENT ORIGINATION HELPS US

Aud: How does understanding dependent origination and Emptiness help us?

Ven: When we realise Emptiness, we see that there is no solid person who is angry. There is no real person whose reputation needs to be defended. There is no independently beautiful person or object that we have to possess. By realising Emptiness, our attachment, anger, jealousy, pride and other disturbing attitudes vanish, because there is no real person that has to be protected, and there is no real object to be grasped.

That doesn't mean we become inert and unambitious like vegetables, thinking, "There's no real me, no real goal. So why do anything?" Realising selflessness (Emptiness) gives us tremendous space for action. Rather than our energy being consumed by craving,

aversion and ignorance, we are free to use our tremendous wisdom and compassion in many ways to benefit others and ourselves.



Emptiness

The reality of Sunyata, being one of the most profound truths in Buddhism, is often misunderstood. It is, at best, though not ideally, translated as "Emptiness". The following is an introduction to the concept of Emptiness.

Examples of Emptiness

An analogy to explain *Sunyata* is a river. A river does not truly exist on its own as it consists of many streams of water coming and going, which make up its "substance". Each of these streams is just as unsubstantial, each consisting of smaller streams of changing elements within it. There is

thus no substantial or "real" river—there is only the flowing. We say that the river is empty of a fixed nature—exhibiting Emptiness. Everything in the universe (all physical and mental phenomena) exhibits characteristics of Emptiness.

Another example is a waterfall. A waterfall seen from a distance appears as a shiny solid sheet in one piece. But upon closer inspection, we see clearly that the "piece" is a continuous flowing stream of water. There is essentially no fixed "waterfall"—there is only water falling.

The Two Sides of Emptiness

Here is a maxim to help remember the subtle concept of *Sunyata*:

Sunyata affirms the existence of existence;
Sunyata negates the self-nature of existence.

This means the truth of Emptiness does not deny the existence of each and every thing, but it denies the existence of a fixed unchanging self-nature behind each and every thing.

Using a river again as an example, we can say that a river (made of many small streams) exists dependently or conditionally on the streams—this illustrates the first aspect of the above maxim. Because the river flows on and on and hence keeps changing, we say that the river does not exist independently or unconditionally, as it has no unchanging identity or self—this illustrates the second aspect of the maxim.

Emptiness and the Middle Way

The above two aspects of Emptiness should be realised together as they balance to show the Middle Way of reality beyond two extremes.

Realising the first aspect of Emptiness without the second can lead one to be greedy and selfish—falsely believing that all pleasures and material things are "too real" and lasting.

Realising the second aspect without the first can lead one to be pessimistic, passive or immoral, falsely believing that nothing is worth striving for, and that everything is hollow and meaningless.

It is therefore very important to see both these aspects together, so as to function with wisdom in a balanced way in everyday life. One should learn to perceive everything as they are conventionally, while knowing the ultimate nature of their existence. One who realised the truth of Emptiness is able to live positively with great ease and freedom.

Emptiness is Not Nothingness

Emptiness does not refer to either physical or mental nothingness—it is the truth of the infinite open possibilities of "everything-ness". It is change itself, with no fixed nature other than change. Emptiness can be likened to the vast sky that includes and allows the coming and going of phenomena like the clouds and birds. It is not different or separate from phenomena. The potentialities of Emptiness is more than what the unenlightened perceive. It is because of Emptiness that everything, including ourselves, can continually change for the better. Anything can transform into something else when the right combination of causes and conditions is present. Similarly, anyone can become enlightened if one cultivates spiritually. Emptiness is thus a teaching full of hope.

Emptiness of Mind and Matter

Emptiness applies to all physical entities. Much more subtly, it applies to all mental entities (mindstates) too.

All physical entities upon closer inspection are unceasing fluctuations of molecules, of atoms, of electrons, neutrons and protons, of particles, of sub-atomic particles of… energy. All the seemingly solid is manifestation of change.

All mental entities upon closer inspection are processes that change subtly all the time too. For example, we know we have thoughts, though how subtly each thought rises and falls is unnoticed by the untrained mind.

The Magic of Emptiness

Before us is everything as they appear to be, but behind everything is nothing substantial as all is constant change. Yet everything here is indeed here. But the "nothing" that is behind them is here at the same place and time too!

Everything is same in the sense that all are equally of Emptiness. However, everything is distinctly different as they manifest in countless forms. "Everything" also refers to one's possessions, family, health, wealth, fame etc.

Using the river analogy, the river is both here and not here in the same place and time. This applies to everything. The whole world is "real yet unreal" simultaneously. This is the ultimate phenomenal "magic trick" that the unenlightened miss!

Benefits of Realising Emptiness

Our ignorance sees the illusory as being "too real". We see the changing as unchanging and become attached to the unsubstantial. Not seeing the unreality of self creates suffering centring around this false sense of self. There is no hint of a fixed self in anything physical or mental. When self is realised to be empty, all "self-created" problems disappear. All is seen just as it is in its naked reality.

Realising Emptiness brings unlimited ease and happiness as one becomes free of the burden of attachment. Realising Emptiness is to attain the wisdom of selflessness—to see the non-self of everything. The functioning of selflessness is the opposite of selfishness—it is pure compassion. Thus, true wisdom is compassionate and true compassion is wise—they are interdependently linked. These twin peaks of spiritual cultivation are perfected in Enlightenment.

As we familiarise ourselves with Emptiness, we gradually open our minds and free ourselves from the bonds of ignorance. In time, this eliminates delusion, anger, attachment, pride, jealousy and other disturbing attitudes. Ceasing destructive actions motivated by them, realising Emptiness brings True Happiness.

As a summary, a practical application of Emptiness in everyday life would be:

To treasure everything
(in this moment)
as all is transient.

To be unattached to everything
(in this moment)
as all is transient.



Buddhist Rituals and Festivals

Buddhism in practice is more colourful than just learning about the Buddha's life and His teachings. It includes many observances, some of which are common to all Buddhists while others characteristic of a particular culture or country. As we are beings of both reason and emotion, devotional rituals are important in helping us emotionally connect to the Buddha and His teachings. Rituals can bring meaningful solemnity into practice, helping us to focus and attain calmness. They should be done out of sincere faith, not fear, greed or superstition.

Shrine

The shrine found in Buddhist homes or temples is a focal point of Buddhist observances dedicated to the Triple Gem. The Buddha image at the centre of the shrine represents and reminds us of the Buddha and the ideal of Enlightenment, and its perfect qualities of wisdom and compassion, among many others. It helps to inspire us as we recall the greatness of the Buddha and His teachings. The shrine may also include other objects such as a volume of Buddhist scriptures to represent the Dharma. Some shrines may include pictures or photographs of great Buddhist monks and nuns to represent the Sangha. When we stand before a shrine, the objects we see on it help us to recall the qualities found in the Triple Gem. This inspires us to work towards cultivating their qualities within ourselves.

Bowing

Prostration before an image of the Buddha is not idol-worshipping—it is an expression of deep veneration. It acknowledges that the Buddha has attained perfect and supreme Enlightenment. Such an act helps one to overcome egoistic feelings, to become more ready to learn from the Buddha.

Placing Palms Together

Placing one's palms together at the chest level is a traditional gesture to express deep reverence to the Triple Gem. When Buddhists greet one another, they hold their palms together like a budding lotus flower (the Buddhist symbol of purity). This greeting acknowledges the seeds of awakening or Buddhahood within the other person, as we wish one another well-being and happiness. Placing the palms together also has a focusing and calming effect on the mind.

Circumambulation

Circumambulation is the act of going round an object of veneration, such as a stupa (a monument which houses holy relics of the Buddha or great Sangha masters), a Bodhi tree (which the Buddha sat under for shelter before He attained Enlightenment) or a Buddha image—for three or more times as a gesture of respect. It is done by walking clockwise meditatively, keeping one's right towards the object of veneration. Doing so reminds us to keep the Buddha's teachings in the centre of our lives.

Offerings

Making shrine offerings is an act of devotion which expresses appreciation and veneration to the Triple Gem. Each item of offering has its significance.

— Light —

The offering of light reminds us of the illuminating brightness of wisdom, which dispels the darkness of ignorance on the path towards Enlightenment. This urges us to seek the light of ultimate wisdom.

Reverencing the Buddha, we offer candles and lamps:
To Him, who is the light, we offer light.
From His great lamp, a lamp we light within us:
The lamp of Bodhi (awakening) shining
within our hearts.

— Flowers —

The offering of fresh and beautiful flowers, which soon become withered, scentless and discoloured serves as a reminder of the impermanence of all things, including our very lives. This urges us to treasure every moment of our lives while not becoming attached.

Reverencing the Buddha, we offer flowers:
Flowers that today are fresh and sweetly blooming,
Flowers that tomorrow are faded and fallen.
Our bodies too, like flowers, will pass away.

— Incense —

The offering of burning incense which fills the air with fragrance symbolises the virtue and purifying effect of wholesome conduct. This urges us to cease all evil and to cultivate all of the good.

Reverencing the Buddha, we offer incense:
Incense whose fragrance pervades the air.
The fragrance of the perfect life,
sweeter than incense,
Spreads in all directions throughout the world.

— Water —

The offering of water symbolises purity, clarity

and calmness. This urges us to cultivate our body, speech and mind to attain these qualities.

— Fruits —

Fruits symbolise the truth of karmic cause and effect, and the fruits of spiritual attainment that lead towards the ultimate fruit of Enlightenment, which is the goal of all Buddhists. This urges us to strive towards Enlightenment for one and all.

Chanting

Chanting (puja) is a melodious way of reading as one reflects upon the Buddha's teachings. Besides aiding memorisation, chanting in a soothing tune has a calming effect on both the reciter and the hearer. Chanting should be done solemnly with mindfulness and energy. Like meditation, chanting helps one to develop a focused and peaceful state of mind.

Words of the Buddha may also be recited with mindfulness of the Triple Gem in times of fear, whether arising from external sources or within oneself, so that such disturbances can be overcome. This is possible as the Triple Gem is free from all defilements and hindrances such as craving, aversion and ignorance. Chanting can be done in any language. Popular languages include Pali, Sanskrit (languages used in the Buddha's time) Chinese, Tibetan, Thai, English etc.

Many Buddhists chant once in the morning and once in the evening. The purpose of morning puja is to remind oneself to be mindful of the chanted teachings throughout the day. The purpose of evening puja is to reflect on whether one had upheld during the day what one had resolved to in the morning. Though the choice of the material chanted varies from tradition to tradition, some of the general contents include: Going for Refuge, the Five Precepts, Praise to the Triple Gem, Sutras,

Mantras, Homage to Buddhas and Bodhisattvas, Confession of Faults, Rejoicing in Merits and Sharing of Merits.

Mantras

Mantras are strings of short sacred phrases or syllables, which symbolise certain teachings or qualities (e.g. the six syllable mantra "Om Mani Padme Hum," which symbolises compassion), representing the truth in its various aspects. Reciting mantras helps to bring the mind to peace and calmness. Specific mantras can also help to develop certain positive characteristics such as compassion, wisdom and courage.

Homage to Buddhas & Bodhisattvas

Homage to (the names of) Buddhas and Bodhisattvas (e.g. "Namo Amituofo" or Homage to Amitabha Buddha, and "Namo Daci Dabei

Guanshiyin Pusa" or Homage to Avalokiteshvara Bodhisattva of Great Loving-kindness and Compassion) can be chanted single-mindedly to recall and invoke in oneself the virtues and qualities they personify. Doing so helps to remind us that we too can attain perfection in various qualities like them.

Vesak Day

Vesak day is the most important event of the year for the Buddhist community. It commemorates the birth, Enlightenment and final Nirvana of the Buddha on the full moon day of the fourth lunar month. This occasion is observed by millions of Buddhists throughout the world. It is a festival to rejoice with goodwill to all. It is also an occasion for reflection of our own personal spiritual development.

For many Buddhists, the observance of Vesak

begins early in the morning when they assemble at temples to observe the Eight Precepts. Others may join the communal observances by going through the ceremony of taking the Threefold Refuge, observing the Five Precepts, making offerings at shrines and chanting. They may also participate in special processions and circumambulation, and listen to monastics giving sermons of the Buddha's teachings.

In many temples, Buddhists take part in the ceremonial bathing of an image of baby Prince Siddhartha (the Buddha-to-be) placed in a basin of perfumed water strewn with flowers. The perfumed water is scooped with a ladle and poured over the statue. This symbolises the determination to purify one's unwholesome deeds with wholesome deeds.

Most Buddhists take vegetarian meals on this day as they recall the Buddha's teaching of universal

compassion. On this day, temples are colourfully decorated with Buddhist flags and lights, while shrines are filled with flowers, fruits and other offerings.

Upavasatha Days

On Upavasatha or new and full moon days (the first and fifteenth days of the lunar month), many Buddhists assemble in temples to meditate, make offerings, recite sermons and practise acts of veneration to the Triple Gem. Many also take vegetarian meals on these days while they observe the Eight Precepts.

Ullambana Day

Ullambana is an expression of Buddhists' respect for their ancestors and their compassion for all beings suffering in the realms of misery. The observance of Ullambana on the fifteenth day of

the seventh lunar month is based on the incident of Maudgalyayana (Mogallana), a disciple of the Buddha, who discovered through his meditative powers that his mother had been reborn a hungry ghost. Distressed, he approached the Buddha for help, who then advised him to make offerings to the Sangha, as the merits from doing so would help relieve the suffering of his mother, and that of other beings in the realms of misery. Making offerings to relieve the suffering of the departed and other suffering beings thus became a popular practice.

Ullambana is observed by making offerings of necessities to monastics, reciting sermons and performing acts of charity. The merits from these deeds are then shared with all beings.

Light Transference Ceremony

In this ceremony, devotees hold a lighted candle after sunset, as they pave around the perimeter of a temple or a holy object in walking meditation. Mantras or the Buddha's name are chanted while doing so. The ceremony represents the passing of the light of wisdom (sharing of the truth) to every direction of the world to dispel the darkness of ignorance. On a personal level, it has the significance of lighting one's inner lamp of wisdom.

The indefinite passing on of light to countless others without one's own flame dying illustrates that wisdom can be shared without loss on one's part. The burning of the wick with the melting of the candle reminds us of the impermanence of all conditioned things, including our own lives. Reflecting so helps us to treasure every moment alive without attachment to it. Mindfulness is

practised in not letting the flame be extinguished. This is symbolic of the constant guarding of the mind against negative factors detrimental to the spiritual life. In the ceremony, it is most inspiring to see a single flame illuminate a sea of darkness to become an ocean of lights bringing brightness to one another.

Three Steps One Bow Ceremony

In this ceremony, devotees usually line up before sunrise to meditatively circumambulate the perimeter of the temple, bowing once every three steps, while chanting mantras or the name of the Buddha in praise of Him. Upon every prostration, the Buddha can be visualised to stand before one's palms, which open to receive His teachings. The open palms also symbolise lotuses (our minds) blossoming into purity. (Though lotus flowers' roots are in the "mud of defilements", they blossom untainted.) Every prostration is

thus the paying of respects to the Buddha (or the countless Buddhas and Bodhisattvas). This practice helps to purify the mind, humble the ego and lessen obstacles along the spiritual path as one repents past misdeeds and aspires towards spiritual improvement. With mindfulness of one's body, speech and mind during the practice, concentration and calmness can be attained.

As the ceremony is long, it reminds one of the long and occasionally difficult journey towards Enlightenment. But it also serves to remind us that as long as we are determined, all difficulties can be overcome. Perseverance in completing the practice despite its difficulties also helps to strengthen our faith in the Buddha and His teaching to lead us towards Enlightenment. The break of dawn at the end of the ceremony represents the light of wisdom dispelling the darkness of ignorance as one advances towards Enlightenment.



MEDITATION

Meditation is mental development or cultivation of the mind. Through meditation, one trains to grow spiritually and systematically—as one's consciousness becomes more and more developed. One becomes increasingly aware of oneself, others, one's environment and ultimately, of reality itself. This increased awareness helps us to deal with everyday life situations with greater calm and insight.

Meditation as experienced and taught by the Buddha has two aspects—calmness (or concentration) and insight (or wisdom). As the mind becomes more and more calm, and one's consciousness gets more and more clear, one begins to have "flashes" of insight into the true nature of things—giving rise to wisdom. As

calmness and insight go hand in hand, meditation is complete only after one has attained both great calmness and great insight.

How Can Meditation Help?

By building up good habits of the mind through meditation, our behaviour in daily life gradually changes. E.g. As our anger decreases, we are able to make better decisions and we become less dissatisfied and restless. These results of meditation can be experienced now. We should try to have a broader and more encompassing motivation to meditate than just for our own present happiness. We can generate the motivation to meditate in order to make preparations for future lives, to attain liberation from the cycle of constantly recurring problems, or to reach the state of full Enlightenment for the benefit of all beings.

Is Meditation Important?

It is very beneficial to have a regular meditation practice, even if it is only for a short while each day. It is incorrect to think, “I’m so busy with work, family, and social obligations that I cannot meditate.” If meditation is helpful to us, we should make time for it. Even if we do not meditate, it is important to keep some quiet time for ourselves each day—a time when we can reflect upon ourselves, and to learn about the Dharma.

It is important that we learn to make peace with ourselves, to be able to be happy alone. Setting aside some quiet time, preferably in the morning before the start of the day’s activities or at the end of the day is necessary—especially in modern society where everyone is so busy. We always find time to nourish our bodies, never skipping a meal because we know it is important. Likewise, we should reserve time to nourish our

mind as well. After all, it is our mind, not our body, that continues in future lives. Practising the Dharma benefits others and ourselves. Since the Dharma describes how to create the causes for True Happiness, and since we all want True Happiness, we should practise the Dharma as much as we can.

Can I Meditate for Special Powers?

The ultimate goal of meditation is not for obtaining special powers. Some get very excited about having psychic powers. “Everyone will think I’m special and will come to me for advice. I’ll be well known and respected!” This is an egotistic motivation. If we, for example, still get angry and are unable to control what we think, speak and do, such powers are useless, and are just distractions to our practice. It is far more beneficial to become a wiser and kinder person.

If one has a kind heart, then developing psychic powers could be beneficial for others. High practitioners never go around advertising their powers. Humble people are more impressive than boastful ones, with their serenity and respect for others shining through. People who have subdued their pride, who have compassion towards others, and who are developing their wisdom are those we can trust.

Is Meditation Dangerous?

If we learn to meditate from an experienced teacher who gives instructions on a reliable time-tested method, and if we follow these instructions correctly, there is no danger at all. Meditation is simply building up good habits of the mind. This can be done in a gradual way. It is unwise to try advanced practices without proper instruction when one is a beginner.



Fruits of Attainment

Buddhism exists and aims for the Enlightenment of one and all. Therefore, Buddhahood or supreme Enlightenment is the ultimate goal of a Buddhist. Simply put, it is the achievement of True Happiness. Broadly summarised, the levels of spiritual attainment as stages towards supreme Enlightenment include the following.

Arahanthood

One can aspire to attain Arahanthood (Arahatship), becoming an *Arahant* (or Arhat). An *Arahant* is one who has attained the bliss and Enlightenment of Nirvana, achieving freedom from craving,

aversion and ignorance (which cause all suffering), thereby ending the cycle of birth and death for oneself.

Bodhisattvahood

An *Arahant* can also progress to attain Bodhisattvahood, becoming a Bodhisattva. A Bodhisattva is one who resolves, out of compassion, to help all other living beings, along with oneself, to progress towards supreme Enlightenment. Though Bodhisattvas vow not to enter the bliss of supreme Enlightenment before all others are released from suffering, they realise that only Buddhas, being supremely enlightened, have the perfect compassion and wisdom to best help others. Thus, they seek to attain supreme Enlightenment, but they do not remain in their own blissful state and forget about others. They manifest in various forms to skilfully guide others

towards Enlightenment. It is possible to begin the path towards Enlightenment by first having the Bodhisattva ideal, instead of the *Arahant* ideal.

BUDDHAHOOD

With the perfection of Bodhisattvahood, one attains Buddhahood, becoming a Buddha. A Buddha is one who has attained supreme Enlightenment, possessing perfect wisdom and compassion.

When a Buddha "passes away," He leaves His body and enters the perfect timeless bliss of *Parinirvana* (final Nirvana). Out of compassion, He can re-manifest Himself indefinitely as Bodhisattvas or as a Buddha to help others realise supreme Enlightenment.



Buddhism and Science

A group of over 10,000 earnest intellectuals once requested the Buddha to explain about the nature of the universe. This was followed by a series of daily lectures and demonstrations lasting three months. The Buddha's explanations were given to the satisfaction of everyone present.

It is most remarkable that when reduced to basic principles, many statements in the Buddhist scriptures are in line with modern scientific discoveries. Buddhism is scientific in that it combines objective observation, experimentation and analysis in the spirit of free enquiry.

Buddhism is beyond science as it can contribute to modern life by providing moral and spiritual guidance for us in our increasingly technological and materialistic age, showing us the path to True Happiness. As Einstein said, "Religion without science is blind; science without religion is crippled."

YOU ARE SHOT!

In reality, the Buddha never wished to dwell much on (meta)physical issues of the universe, as they have little value for spiritual development towards True Happiness. He only taught them out of compassion—either to bring about an underlying teaching, or to satisfy the curiosity of those who would otherwise not hear His actual teachings. The Buddha assured us that upon our Enlightenment, answers to all speculative questions would be known, thus we do not need to focus too much on them now.

The Buddha compared one who keeps asking speculative questions to a man shot by a poisoned arrow, who refuses to remove it till he knows who shot it, how it was shot, from where was it shot… By the time these are answered, he would be dead. Likewise, we are "shot" by the arrow of impending death and constant dissatisfaction, and should never forget our priority of attaining Enlightenment.

Matter

The Buddhist teaching, "Form is Emptiness; Emptiness is form. Form is not different from Emptiness; Emptiness is not different from form." implies the fact that matter is neither truly solid nor ultimately different from the "Emptiness" of energy, as the material can become immaterial with no "solid" core and vice versa. It is the Buddhist version of the famous law: $E=mc^2$ (E = energy, m = mass, c = the speed of light). The atomic

bomb is an example of how a little matter can be converted into tremendous energy. Likewise, energy can be converted to matter. Though science has yet to discover how, the Buddha was recorded to have performed such "miraculous" feats. He did so only out of compassion, to humble the proud, whom He knew were ready to listen to His teachings, only being hindered by pride.

MIND

The Buddha declared that the primary factor and most powerful force of the universe is the mind. Scientists today realise that the mind of a person can create reality in what and how it perceives. Mental energy is not yet fully understood by science. The Buddha however, taught in great detail about the dynamics of the mind. The mastery of the mind is of the greatest importance as it is the key to True Happiness and liberation.

Relativity

The Buddha, like Einstein, discovered the truth of relativity—that space and time are not absolute but relative, functioning interdependently. Space and time are experienced differently by individuals in different worlds and mindstates. The world experienced in the state of Enlightenment is the vivid awareness of the interpenetration of space and time.

Time

Buddhism defines time as "the measurement of change". This is scientific as time is linked with the motion of matter (or energy) in space. The concept of time is meaningless when there is no change. Time has no beginning or end in Buddhism as all things (except the state of Enlightenment which is timeless) undergo constant change. There is only the central moment

of "now" that is meaningful to our existence at the moment.

Space

In Buddhism, space is defined as the voidness in between matter which allows motion and interaction. As it extends infinitely in all directions, any point in the universe can be considered central. Likewise, scientists look into outer space and discover our position in the universe to be largely similar to other points in space. There is no special position in the universe as it is filled homogeneously with world-systems. There is only the central place of "here" that is meaningful to our existence at the moment.

Atom

As the atom (previously assumed to be indivisible) is recently proven to be divisible indefinitely, it

is therefore not the basic unit of matter. Thus, an atom is not really an atom; it is called so for convenience. Likewise, the Buddha says that when He speaks of the "universe" (made up of energy and atoms), He does not really mean the "universe" per se—He calls it so only nominally.

Quantum Physics

Scientists discovered in quantum physics that atoms and subatomic particles do not have definite locations or "meaningful" motion, appearing random and unpredictable. This led them to conclude that the "building blocks of reality" are "imaginary ghosts". The way an observer chooses to view an experiment determines the part of the observed phenomena to be manifested. The manifested properties are nothing but intersection and interaction of the observer's mind with phenomena. The theory also suggests that reality is not merely constructed by the mind of the

observer, but that there are countless realities constructed by countless minds—each equally real or equally unreal. They may very much resemble one another, or be virtually opposite in nature.

Likewise, in Buddhism, it is the mind that constructs the indeterminate nature of the manifestation of ultimate reality in a particular way. Given particular conditions, the mind constructs reality in a determinate way, generally in terms of existence or non-existence, and more specifically, in the form of change within the six realms of existence (or the thirty-one planes of existence).

INTERDEPENDENCE

The constituents of the material and mental universe interact with one another and are inseparable such that nothing (no single thing) exists individually, with each thing being equally

important. The Buddha taught this as the (inter)dependent origination of all phenomena.

Change

The "solid" existence of any object is an illusion as the universe is simply a complex process of unceasing interconnected activities in which nothing moves independently of the others. The Buddha taught this as the constant fluctuation and transient nature of all conditioned things—even at the level of atomic matter.

Microorganisms

The Buddha once held up a cup and remarked that there were 84,000 (a number to denote "many" or "countless") beings in it. No one understood what He meant then. Today, we use a microscope and see that He referred to invisible micro-organisms.

EVOLUTION OF THE UNIVERSE

The Buddha taught that the universe undergoes two major periods of change, which repeat endlessly—cosmic expansion and contraction. This is like the model of the oscillating universe, which says that the universe began with a Big Bang, when matter exploded and expanded, forming galaxies. When the force of expansion is depleted, the universe closes in on itself through gravity with a Big Crunch, before expanding again. Thus, it is likely that there have been, and will be, infinite universes. The evolution of the universe is natural—not unlike the water cycle, where water evaporates to form clouds before falling as rain and evaporating again. Thus, being part of a self-contained cyclical process, water (and all other phenomena) does not require a creator.

Structure of the Universe

According to the Buddha, the universe exists in tiers, the smallest being the Thousand-fold Minor World System—this describes a galaxy (e.g. the Milky Way), which contains millions of stars and planets. The next tier is called a Twice-a-Thousand Middling World System—this describes galactic clusters (e.g. Coma Berenices). The Middling World System consists of up to a hundred or thousand galactic clusters. Next is the Major World System, formed by clusters of Middling World Systems—this describes a Metagalaxy (e.g. within the Big Dipper, which "frames" at least a million galaxies). Though this is the farthest that modern scientific instruments can observe only recently, the Buddha taught this cosmic view long before invention of the telescope.

Galaxies

The Buddhist scriptures describe that there exists "worlds shaped like flowers". This corresponds to billowy intergalactic gas clouds (that contain billions of stars) observed by radio-telescopes. "Some are vast as the ocean, spinning like a turning wheel. Some are slender (e.g. galaxies observable in Cetus, Pegasus and Hercules). Some are small. For they have countless forms. (Galaxies have countless shapes.) And they spin in various ways (Galaxies revolve around their nuclei.)… Some worlds are like a glowing wheel (Some galaxies have strong luminosity)."

Quasars

Some world systems (galaxies) are described in the Buddhist scriptures to erupt violently like volcanoes. This corresponds to quasars that actively explode, ejecting incredible amounts of matter from the nuclei of galaxies.

Black Holes

Some cosmic worlds are described in the Buddhist scriptures to be like the "lion's mouth" which eat everything—this corresponds to Black Holes that devour everything within its gravitational reach.

Planets

The Buddhist scriptures describe that, "Many world-systems are full of rock-torn earth—dangerous and destroying." While this may be true of planets of other star-systems, it is already proven for some of our solar system's planets—such as Mars and Venus. The Earth was also described to have formed out of a mass of heavy thick matter that gradually hardened to solidify. This is agreed by science.

Evolution

The Buddha's teachings agree with the science of natural selection to a broad extent. It teaches that all sentient beings, by their instinctual will to survive, continuously evolve either into higher (and more intelligent) lifeforms or devolve into lower lifeforms (through the force of Karma—in a single life or through rebirth). This carries on indefinitely till one attains the highest state of evolution, becoming a Buddha—having fully evolved both mentally and physically.

The Buddha's account of how life arose and developed in our world is startlingly similar to parts of the theory of evolution proposed by Darwin. The Buddha spoke of the becoming and re-becoming of the universe over a period of countless billions of years, in relation to the development of humans, the arising of good and evil in society, and how such a society

progressed. The Buddha also taught about how life first formed on the surface of the Earth, before evolving from the simple to the complex over a long time. These cyclic processes are set in motion by natural and karmic causes. It is also recorded how the previous universe ended and stabilised, re-evolved and re-stabilised with the appearance of beings of the different planes of existence.

Energy

Buddhism believes in the indestructibility or preservation of energy. This is in line with the law of conservation of energy, which states that energy can neither be created nor destroyed; that it can only be transformed from one form to another. The teaching of rebirth is an example of the transfer of imperishable mental energy from one body to another.

Alien Life

The Buddha described worlds beyond ours in the vastness of outer space and other dimensions, which are inhabited by many other intelligent sentient lifeforms, some of which are not very unlike ours. The possible existence of extra-terrestrial life is highly agreeable among scientists today.

Causality

The Buddha taught that all physical and mental phenomena arise through the combination or networks of causes and conditions. The Buddhist laws of cosmic cause and effect (which includes Karma) are equivalent to the law of causality (causation) in science. It is the truth that there is a cause for every single thing (effect) that occurs or exists. With the right conditions, every effect can in turn be the cause or condition of another effect. There is no inexplicable, random

or supernatural phenomenon in Buddhism. The supernatural is only nature yet to be understood by the unenlightened.

Psychology

The Buddha was among the first to look in-depth into the human psyche and its experiences. His teachings offer radical solutions for the pervasive problem of dissatisfaction. Science is discovering that much of modern psychology is but a recent extension of Buddhism. Buddhist meditation offers ancient yet advanced methods for self-healing and psychotherapy.

Psychic Powers

E.S.P. (Extra Sensory Perception), telekinesis and other such phenomena were explained by the Buddha as psychic powers, achievable by anyone who trains to concentrate and focus the mind.

(This is "mind over matter".) As the mind is the most powerful force in the universe, mastery of the mind opens the gates to unlimited physical power. The Buddha Himself was fully capable of psychic powers as He had mastered His mind perfectly. However, knowing that psychic powers do not bring True Happiness, His displayed miracles were only skilful "sideshows" to inspire faith, being secondary to His teachings.

Electrons

In the words of the famous physicist Oppenheimer, *"If we ask, for instance, whether the position of the electron remains the same, we must say 'no'; if we ask whether the electron's position changes with time, we must say 'no'; if we ask whether it is in motion, we must say 'no.' The Buddha has given such answers when interrogated as to the conditions of a man's self after his death…" For those familiar with physics, such parallels are surely surprising!*



Know This!

The Buddha is Alive!

Some think the Buddha was born in India more than 2,500 years ago and passed away 80 years later. This "human" Buddha is only the earthly appearance of the true *Dharmakaya* Buddha who exists forever. This true Buddha reappears in our world in a human form soon after the true teachings of the Dharma are forgotten.

For those who do not understand, the Buddha appears to have died. Supposing you thought that your most respected teacher had died, would this belief not make you rely on yourself to work more

diligently for liberation? This is the purpose of the Buddha's "passing".

For those who know, the Buddha never died. The Buddha is truth. And the truth can never die. Birth and death have no power over truth. Even after the human form of the Buddha has passed away, we are still able to see Him. For the Buddha says, *"He who sees the truth sees me."* (Thus Said, 91) Furthermore, the Buddha instructs, *"The teachings and the discipline which I have given you will be your teacher." (The Discourse on the Great Decease,* 2:154*)*

Even at this very moment, the future Buddha is awaiting for the time for Him to appear in our world after the true teachings have been forgotten. In other words, there is always a Buddha who will appear to help the world. This Buddha will always be the human form of the one and only true Buddha—the Buddha who is eternal and universal.

The Buddha Can Help You!

The Buddha is all-compassionate. He says, *"Out of compassion, I survey the whole world with the Buddha-eye."* (*Middle Length Sayings,* 1:169) Whenever someone is in need of help or ready to receive the true teaching, the Buddha appears to him. But very often, we do not know that it is the Buddha who is helping us. The Buddha says, *"Remember... when I used to enter a gathering of hundreds of important people, of religious people, of householders, of people of other religions, and the various gods, before I sat down and talked to them, I changed myself to look like them, and spoke like them. When I have finished teaching them, they were very joyful. But they did not know who I was even after I have vanished away."* (*Discourse on the Great Decease,* 1:109—paraphrased)

Whenever you are in trouble, all you need to do is look to the Buddha for help. For He taught, *"Fear*

not, as you look upon me, I will release you, just like a person saving an elephant which has sunk in the mud." (*The Story of Elder Vakkali, Dhammapada Commentary* 4:119)

Buddhist Prayer Works!

Just give it a try. Buddhist prayer works. You can communicate with the Buddha directly. The Buddha taught, *"When you are in the forest or in empty places, if fear and panic should arise in you, immediately call me to mind. For if you do so, the fear or panic will be overcome."* (*Discourse on the Banner Top, Kindred Sayings* 1:219—paraphrased)

Every teaching of the Buddha is like a prayer that can be used as daily spiritual reminders. For example, the Buddha tells us not to worry about the past or the future—only the present is real and matters. He taught, *"Do not think of the past; do not worry about the future. What is past is gone;*

the future has yet to come. Use your wisdom and pay attention to the present. Do your work today itself." (*Discourse on the Bhaddekaratta*—summarised)

You Can Save Yourself!

No one can save us—except ourselves! This is a wonderful message that the Buddha gave us. The Buddha taught, *"By oneself is evil done; by oneself is one made impure. By oneself only is evil stopped; by oneself is one made pure. Purity and impurity depend on oneself. No one can purify another."* (*Dhammapada* verse 165)

Furthermore, the Buddha says that we can become our own master, *"One is one's own master. For who else can be one's master? If one is well-controlled, one wins a master who is difficult to find."* (*Dhammapada* verse 160)

All the while we have been good, says the Buddha.

Unhappiness is due to some greed, hatred and ignorance in our daily lives that only temporarily cloud our mind. "This mind of ours is pure, but it is dirtied by outside things." (*Gradual Sayings* 1:10)

In the Buddha's teachings, there is no sin, commandments, judgment, eternal heaven or hell. There is just the pure Buddha mind for us to attain. "All beings are able to become Buddhas!" (*Ratna-gotra-vibhaga* 1)



Schools of Buddhism

The Buddha, who was a very compassionate and skilful teacher, gave a variety of teachings (generally called the Theravada, Mahayana and the Vajrayana traditions) suitable for people of different interests and inclinations. In fact, it is said that the Buddha gave as many as 84,000 teachings! Not everyone is expected to practise in the same way. Thus, Buddhists welcome the rich diversity of Buddhists traditions, which evolved in different cultural settings with different needs. Though the teachings are many, they are often intricately interlinked—with the common goal of attaining freedom, compassion and wisdom. The Buddha said:

"As the vast ocean is of one taste, the taste of salt. So also, in my teachings, there is but one taste—the taste of freedom."

Harmony of Buddhist Traditions

Although Buddhism is one of the world's oldest religions, there has never been a serious war fought in its name or over its doctrines. Sectarianism is considered extremely destructive, for to say one tradition is good and another is bad is to criticise the teachings the Buddha gave to a particular group of people.

Although we may find one particular tradition best suited for our personality, it is unwise to identify with it too strongly. (E.g. "I am a Mahayanist, you are a Theravadin.") It is important to remember that we all seek True Happiness and want to realise the truth. We each have to find a method that best suits our disposition.

OPENNESS TO ALL TRADITIONS

We are free to choose the approach that suits us best, which we feel the most comfortable with. However, it is important to maintain an open mind and respect for other traditions. As our minds develop, we may come to understand elements in other traditions that we failed to comprehend previously. In short, we should practise whatever we find useful to help us live a better life, and we can leave aside without criticising whatever we do not yet understand.

Keeping an open mind to different traditions does not require mixing everything together randomly. It is better to focus on one Dharma teaching at a time. If we take a little of this and a little of that without enough understanding, we may end up confused. However, a teaching emphasised in one tradition may enrich our understanding and practice of another. It is also advisable to do the

same practices daily. If we do one practice one day and another the next, we will hardly make progress in any of them. However, we can do both practices each day, as long as continuity is maintained in both steadily.



Who is a True Buddhist?

What makes someone a Buddhist? What distinguishes a Buddhist from a non-Buddhist? Being Buddhist means different things to different people. If so, *who is a true Buddhist?*

Only Doing Rituals

Is one who *only* participates in traditional Buddhist rituals and ceremonies, and visits temples to make offerings a true Buddhist?

Such activities are valuable when done in the right spirit, as they can arouse faith and sustain

determination in following the Buddha's path. However, what is more important is to purify one's mind—and to increase wisdom and compassion. Rites and rituals alone might have the opposite effect, with the formalities becoming ends in themselves.

Only Wanting Merits

Is one who *only* accumulates merits for pleasant future experiences a true Buddhist?

Spiritual materialism is just as bad as the usual materialism—both are forms of attachment and selfishness. Good should just be done simply because it is good; we should not be attached to the benefits we get from doing good.

Only Being Moral

Is one who *only* practises morality a true Buddhist?

There is the common misconception that we must perfect our morality before progress on the spiritual path is possible—especially before we meditate. However, morality also naturally deepens with meditation as one weakens selfishness. The practice of morality alone without the realisation of wisdom cannot bring us Enlightenment. Enlightenment is not a distant goal if we are to mindfully live in the moment, from moment to moment.

Only Blind Belief

Is one who distinguishes one's Buddhist faith from other religions, opposes all their teachings, and believes that there is absolutely no truth in them a true Buddhist?

All religions have certain elements of truth in them. There is always something we can learn from them, though Buddhists believe the Buddha

has already taught us all we need to know to practise the path towards Enlightenment and True Happiness.

Only Faith

Is one who *only* believes that merely having faith in the Buddha will "save" oneself a true Buddhist?

It is wishful thinking that depending entirely on someone else rather than making any personal effort to practise the path towards Enlightenment will bring us True Happiness. If we sincerely make the effort to practise, our lives will naturally improve. We must realise the truth for ourselves—no one can do this for us. The Buddha realised that all beings have the same Buddha-nature as Him. Thus, we too can realise the truth like He did.

Who is a True Buddhist?

Firstly, a true Buddhist is one who has confidence that the Buddha's Enlightenment is what it was—spiritual liberation through the complete realisation of the essential nature of self and all phenomena—which ended all personal suffering, thus attaining True Happiness.

Secondly, a Buddhist makes it an important goal to strive towards the same experience by following the path that the Buddha showed, going to the Triple Gem for refuge. A Buddhist has faith that the Buddha's invaluable experience was not a delusion, that it can be experienced by anyone through the diligent practice of His teachings. Crucial on the path to Enlightenment is mindfulness—which leads to the understanding of one and all, giving rise to perfect wisdom and compassion.

Well, are you a true Buddhist yet?